

# A Spartan's Loyal Heartbeat

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Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: C. Halsey, Fred-104, Kelly-087, Master Chief/John-117

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2013-03-03 18:28:29

Updated: 2014-03-30 00:49:17

Packaged: 2016-04-27 04:06:19

Rating: T

Chapters: 19

Words: 112,036

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: Upon entering the Sphere, the IIs and IIIs must learn to get along to repair a damaged Pelican and escape. As the Forerunner AIs pit their puppets against the alliance between the Separatists and humans, the occupants of the Dyson sphere must see past their jealousies to come to the rescue of their race - and their brother.

## 1. Prologue

\_Well, I'm baaaack! I know, sorry for the long wait. I've done nothing but homework, it seems. Lots on my plate! Sorry if updates aren't as quick as they were. First, I have to write the whole story and then edit it as I go along. \_

\_For new readers: This is a continuation of \_A Spartan's Peaceful Heartbeat\_, told during the same chronological timeline from the perspective of Dr. Halsey, Kelly, Linda, Fred, Mendez, Tom, and Lucy, stuck in the Dyson sphere (for now). This is an AU story. I started it before Halo 4 came out, and it doesn't follow \_Glasslands\_, either, though you can take \_Ghosts of Onyx\_ with this storyline. Feel free to tap in with anything you want to say; I love love love reviews! \_

**\*\*Prologue: The Dyson Sphere\*\***

Kelly frowned behind her helmet; Lucy and Tom were fidgeting again, though silently. She glanced over at Linda without moving her head and knew, from the position of the Spartan II's shoulders, that she, too, saw the twitching. The tiny Spartan III, Lucy-B091, was still startling; she was half a foot shorter than the IIs, and four inches shorter than Tom-B292. Both were lithe and muscular, but Lucy looked up to even Dr. Halsey. She didn't speak, either, no matter what; Tom translated for her or she used hand-signals.

The four guards were ranged on the back-side of a small hill, between the plains of grass in front of them and the cave behind them, which was dug into the side of a larger hill. It had taken several hours to do it; they didn't have shovels, and there wasn't any wood around, either, to make them from. Fred "Lieutenant Fred," Kelly reminded herself, with a small pang of sadness for the loss of Kurt "had taken charge.

Tom and Lucy were just ticking time bombs, Kelly knew; they clearly weren't functioning at 100%. Neither were the IIs, but they, at least, weren't jumping at every sound. Dr. Halsey had obviously seen it; her blue-grey eyes missed nothing, especially when it concerned Spartans she hadn't even known existed until recently.

"Kelly." Linda's soft voice over her comm "a private channel " woke the Spartan II from her thoughts. She clicked once, in acknowledgement, though she made no outward sign of their communication. "Three o'clock; I think there's a bird."

They both turned their heads to look in synchronized movement that only Spartans could manage; belatedly, Tom and Lucy caught the hint and glanced over, as well, though it was technically out of their line of sight and they moved their gaze back rapidly.

"Looks like," Kelly muttered, squinting at the far-off speck. It certainly was flying " though whether a bird or machine was hard to tell.

"Bogie at three," Linda told Fred calmly; the Lieutenant came out from the cave where he had been talking softly with the Chief and Dr. Halsey.

"Defensive positions," Fred ordered. Instantly, Tom and Lucy moved back and up, onto the lip over the cave. Fred, Linda, and Kelly ranged in front of the cave's mouth, Linda on her stomach and the other two crouching to her sides. The Chief stayed in the cave with Dr. Halsey.

The speck grew larger " it was clearly a machine. Kelly sighted along her rifle at it, but didn't yet fire. The Sentinels back on Onyx didn't take that sort of attack kindly, and they didn't have the terrain " or weapons " to fight off even a single one. Her rifle was empty anyway, but if the machine couldn't tell, it might not be willing to attack a clearly well-defended cave.

"Steady. Hold fire," Fred ordered. Kelly could hear the elevated breathing of Tom and Lucy behind her; in contrast, the IIs were utterly calm, calculating the best angles of attack should the thing prove hostile.

The drone of the machine reached them just as Kelly began making out details of the thing. A small sphere, with a glowing eye in the middle. It looked to be hovering without any visible means of propulsion.

It came closer, drifting along sedately. As it closed with them, Kelly realized the drone she had been hearing was actually a humming, and it stopped when the machine was within a hundred yards. It halted and observed them, its blue glowing "eye" looking over each one carefully.

Fred shifted and the machine came forward just a bit, almost warily. The three IIs shared a glance; Fred stepped forward and held his hands out, palms up â€" a universal "don't shoot, I'm unarmed" gesture. Kelly and Linda lowered their empty weapons.

The little ball hovered closer, coming within almost fifty meters. Now Kelly could clearly see the booms to either side of the spherical "eye," rather like curved squares. It said something â€" but they didn't recognize the language, if that was what it was.

"We don't understand," Fred said slowly. The machine trilled; it sounded happy.

"Do you understand now?" it asked, floating a tiny bit closer. Fred's eyebrow rose.

"Yes."

"You are human?" It sounded slightly unsure; the IIIs were in the SPI armor, and the IIs were encased in their MJOLNIR Mark IVs.

"Yes," Fred answered again, tapping his chest. "I am Lieutenant Frederic-104, of the United Nations Space Command."

"I am 957 Keen Sacrifice, at your service, 104."

Fred nodded and turned back to the cave. "Dr. Halsey," he called. The doctor came out quickly, followed by Chief Mendez, who scowled at the alien construct.

The doctor observed the small orb closely, grey-blue eyes lighting up, though she didn't go in front of Fred; if it turned dangerous, she would be completely exposed.

"I am 957 Keen Sacrifice, at your service, Dr. Halsey," the thing said in greetings, trilling softly. Tom and Lucy leapt down from their position; Kelly and Linda stood. "You are a large group, indeed. I felt the disturbance of your arrival and I came as quickly as I could."

"What is your purpose?" Dr. Halsey asked curiously.

The eye looked at her, and the voice from the machine sounded a little condescending. "To protect this world and husband its inhabitants against illness, disease, war, and the Great Flood, of course. You are the first to arrive, since my creator left. It is very exciting."

Dr. Halsey raised an eyebrow â€" the Spartans shifted slightly. "How long have you been here?"

"That is not important," the machine said airily. "You are here now. Though why you felt you had to destroy the Shield World to get hereâ€"|"

"That wasn't us," Dr. Halsey replied. "It was the Covenant â€" they have been attacking our kind for years now. We are sorely needed outside; can you release us from this sphere?"

"Oh, certainly."

Chief Mendez sighed softly in relief, as did the doctor; the Spartans kept their relief to themselves.

"But you will have to come with me. I'm afraid the systems have been severely degraded by time. Come, come, this way." It spurred off quickly; Dr. Halsey dashed back into the cave to gather their supplies.

"Dr. Halsey, is this thing trustworthy?"

"It's our best bet of getting out of here," the woman answered, jogging after the machine with her grey hair bouncing. The Spartans quickly formed a defensive perimeter around her and Chief Mendez; the machine floated above them and led them on, always with their back to the source of light.

It didn't speak again, preferring, apparently, to hum. At least it wasn't tuneless, though by the time "dusk" was setting as the light source dimmed, all of the company was heartily tired of the sound above their heads.

They walked through the plains, the tall grass softly hissing against the Spartan's armor and their footsteps quiet on the soft dirt. In the distance, as they trooped after the machine, Linda could barely make out the shadow of a tall structure " or perhaps several " against the horizon. When asked, Keen Sacrifice admitted that it was their destination. It didn't seem to get any bigger as they marched through the day.

Dr. Halsey stumbled slightly as it grew darker, tripping over a rock; Fred grasped her arm gently. "Thanks," the doctor chuckled softly. "I need a break," she admitted ruefully. She sat on a boulder; Fred and Linda took first watch and circled the perimeter as the rest sat down or lay down.

The machine hovered uncertainly and then descended to speak with the doctor. "We cannot afford delay, Dr. Halsey," it sputtered unhappily.

"Not all of us can march through the day and night, Keen Sacrifice," Dr. Halsey chuckled. "We need a break " we're only flesh and blood creatures."

"Oh, well" It sounded unsure. "Will it take long?"

"Five hours should do it." This clearly didn't make the machine any happier; it flittered about nervously and then darted back.

"If I should bring transportation, will you be able to continue?" it asked. Dr. Halsey nodded and it zipped away without another comment.

Fred removed his helmet for a moment, letting the cool breeze dry the sweat in his streaked black hair; his grey eyes met Linda's green as she pulled off her own helmet, shaking out her thin-shorn red hair. They kept their backs to the company, watching outwards for any sign of danger. Kelly, too, removed her helmet, though her brown hair was more black than anything with sweat and her blue eyes glared after

the little machine.

"What kind of AI is it, Doctor?" she asked Dr. Halsey. Chief Mendez listened in, though his brown eyes were closed. Tom and Lucy, though still slightly unsure of Dr. Halsey, both watched her as she spoke.

"It's obviously Forerunner â€" an ancilla left to keep the peace here. But if they never got around to stocking this sphere with animals, it's been here for eons without anything to do. Our AIs have an operational life of seven to eight years â€" this one may well be rampant."

"Is it safe?" Fred asked curtly.

"Well, that would depend on what you mean by 'safe,'" Dr. Halsey said softly. Kelly scowled; Dr. Halsey's idea of "safe" had been to kidnap her and bring her to Onyx. "If it is rampant, its core coding â€" to protect the creatures here â€" may mean it won't let us leave. If, however, it managed to remain 'sane,' it may be willing to help us return to our friends, though how long that will take I cannot say."

"It is possible that it's lying?" Linda asked quietly.

The doctor thought for a moment. "Possibly. But even if it turns against us, we have five Spartans here â€" surely we can handle anything it throws at us. Plus, it had brought us within eyesight of some sort of structure, which is better than a cave in the hillside."

Chief Mendez broke out the supplies, handing everyone a high-density meal bar from their limited supply. "Hopefully they have food," he grunted.

They all ate quickly, unwilling to really taste the super-dense food. Then Linda and Fred put their helmets back on and returned to their patrol; the others lay down for a quick nap.

Linda and Fred woke simultaneously, however, as the ground underneath them rumbled softly; Tom and Lucy were just behind them, and all four stood to join Kelly and Chief Mendez, on watch. They tried to pinpoint the direction the sound was coming from; at last, Kelly pointed into the darkness and everyone strained their eyesight.

Bright light flooded the camp; Dr. Halsey woke with a soft gasp and the Spartans all shielded their eyes, crouching defensively.

"Will this do for transport, Dr. Halsey?"

Kelly couldn't see the infernal little blob, but it was whirring near-by. She lashed out and grabbed it, moving as quickly as possible. It squeaked slightly, startled, as she yanked it down to face-level. Her visor had polarized and filtered out the blinding light, so she could see the thing.

Dr. Halsey touched her arm gently. "It's alright, Kelly," she said softly. "Keen Sacrifice brought us a ship of some sort." She moved towards the source of the bright lights; everyone hurried to follow

her except Kelly.

"Never sneak up on us like that again," Kelly hissed at the ancilla before releasing it.

"Really," it huffed, floating away quickly. "You might appreciate the lengths to which I went to bring this here for your leader."

Kelly didn't respond; she trotted into the lights and found the team gathered around the platform, which seemed to be hovering. Its lights pierced the absolute darkness. Dr. Halsey climbed on board, using the small break in a railing that encircled the deck of the thing, and moved towards the lights. There was a control panel there, equipped with several read-out screens scrolling with Forerunner symbols and two simple joysticks.

"Looks easy enough," the doctor muttered, setting her knapsack at her feet.

"Let us go quickly," Keen Sacrifice urged, staying well away from Kelly as the rest of the group climbed onto the deck. The platform didn't even wobble as the nearly two tons of Spartans, in their Mark IVs, climbed on board.

Dr. Halsey played with the controls for a moment, resulting in the ship's lurching about in every direction, including up, before setting the joystick in her right hand forward and leaving the other one alone. They shot forward; Mendez grabbed onto the railing for support while the Spartans set their feet. Fred stood just behind Dr. Halsey, in case she fell.

"Yes, much better." Keen Sacrifice was pacing them easily; looking over the side, Kelly estimated that they were moving at least twice as fast as she could run; nearly 120 KPH. The wind should have been whistling over the deck, possibly lifting the two unarmored humans from their feet, but there appeared to be an invisible barrier just in front of Dr. Halsey that deflected it.

The machine touched down on the control panel and whirred softly. "Very good, very good," it muttered, turning its eye on the horizon. "We should be there within one of your hours."

"How far is it?" Fred asked.

"In your terms, nearly one hundred and fifty kilometers."

"What will we find there?" Dr. Halsey asked, tapping the left control stick to lift them slightly farther up off the ground to clear a field of boulders.

"All that you require to survive until you can repair the ship that will take us from here," the ancilla replied.

"You're going to come with us?" Fred asked, surprised.

"Of course," the machine said. "You are my charges. I have undertaken your safety and guidance; it would be irresponsible of me to send you back to the Covenant without my advice."

"What about this world? Aren't you supposed to guide other things that come here?"

"Oh, well, I will create another to watch for the next group, just as I was created by 956 Ardent Sacrifice."

"Where did Ardent Sacrifice go?" Dr. Halsey asked.

"With the last group. They, too, were determined to return to your world, though why children should want to return to war is beyond me." The machine's eye looked critically at Tom and Lucy, who stared back.

"What children?" Chief Mendez asked quickly.

The machine hummed. "Well, I do not know. 956 Ardent Sacrifice left with them before I was quite complete. My attempts to communicate with 956 â€" or any other of my predecessors â€" has failed, however, which means they are likely dead."

Tom, Lucy, and Chief Mendez shared a glance that Fred, Kelly, and Linda couldn't read. Dr. Halsey was silent, staring forward as the landscape flashed by through the beams of the headlights.

The rest of the hour passed quickly; Dr. Halsey showed Fred how to work the controls and then sat with her back against the control panel to write about their experience since her last log on her laptop.

Keen Sacrifice told them to slow as the grass in the beams of light began to give way to what looked like cement; Dr. Halsey woke as Fred obligingly throttled back on the joystick, having dozed off in the middle of her report. She quickly saved it and stood, shouldering her pack.

They glided slowly into what was clearly a street, with two- and three-story buildings on either side. Other streets broke off occasionally, but Keen Sacrifice led them straight to the heart of the city. Dawn was pinking in the arbitrarily-designated "east" as Fred halted before the building the ancilla indicated, and they all disembarked.

The Spartans warily spread out, leaving Linda with the sled to watch the quiet city as they followed the machine into the depths of the building, the only light coming from Keen Sacrifice's eye and, slowly, the windows in the ceiling, nearly thirty feet above their heads.

"Welcome to Building 0571," Keen Sacrifice announced as the group strode into an even larger chamber; this was lit by several panels of soft light, which made the room look oddly flat except where several machines â€" clearly ships by the designs, though the closest ones were much smaller than even a Pelican â€" rested. Dr. Halsey ran her hands over the closest one, which resembled an enclosed automobile with sleek lines and no obvious hatch, weaponry, or antennae.

"Will one of these carry us out of here?" she asked the ancilla.

Keen Sacrifice tittered. "Oh, yes, once they have been repaired. You

may choose whichever you like; they are all in need of repair. If I might make a suggestion, thoughâ€¦" He drew them further into the room. "This may be the easiest to repair, and it will certainly fit you more comfortably."

Dr. Halsey walked around the Pelican; it had a few scorch marks and its rear hatch had been torn off, but it was clearly in the best shape of all the ships in the bay. "How did a Pelican get here?" she asked.

"We collect the trash of battles often," Keen Sacrifice said. "The organic matter is burned for fuel; the inorganic matter is devoted to repairing what time would claim or stored against future need."

Fred frowned slightly. "You gather our dead?" he asked.

Keen Sacrifice descended to hover around his head. "Indeed. Otherwise, they would just drift endlessly, or burn up in another planet's atmosphere, uselessly."

"So you have things that go out of the Dyson sphere and come back inside?"

"Oh, regularly," Keen Sacrifice chirped. "But I would not recommend it; our crews are not organic. It is a difficult transition if undertaken so many times â€" the time difference, you know."

Dr. Halsey shook her head. "We don't know," she corrected.

"But surely you know of the dilation effect of Slipspace," the ancilla said. "The "Dyson sphere," as you called it, magnifies these effects."

"So... How long have we been here?" Fred asked carefully.

"In the sphere, three of your days have passed â€" to be exact, 75 of your hours â€" while the outside worlds have moved along at a rate almost five times as quickly, relatively speaking, so fifteen days have passed outside."

They all looked at Dr. Halsey, who scowled slightly. Muttering to herself, she thoughtfully pulled out her laptop and leaned against the Pelican to write.

"How long will this take to repair?" Fred asked, circling the ship quickly. On the surface, the Pelican had clearly been hit by the edge of a plasma beam, which had torn up part of its stubby wings. The loss of the back hatch was puzzling; it looked like it had been torn from its hinges, which would have required a lot of work.

"With your strength and my brains, it should take no longer than a full thirty of yours days, barring any incidents. Though I suppose you require sleep, being organic, so it will take longer â€" possibly fifty days, all told."

"Which will be 250 days in the outside world." Fred frowned. "That's too long to be gone."

"We could always toss you in an egg and send you that way," the ancilla said dryly. "The survival rate is 0.5%, if you'd like to



try."

Fred shook his head. "We'll have to take it. We'll need supplies, too — food, water, recharging stations for our armor, and a place where we can sleep."

"All will be provided," Keen Sacrifice promised, trilling softly. "You may find quarters anywhere in the city; it is quite empty, and there is no danger of attacks here. But you may want to stay closer, to reduce transportation time."

"And showers," Dr. Halsey added, glancing up from her laptop.

"Of course. I think you will find the quarters in the back of this building suitable, if you will follow me. And you can call in the guard you left at the front door. Like I said, this is a perfectly secure area."

Fred called Linda in over the comm and they followed the machine back through a long hallway. It branched off into two wings, both dark until the humans stepped into them. "Choose any room you like," Keen Sacrifice told them, disappearing into an overhead vent. They could hear it humming away as it left them to find accommodations.

Dr. Halsey turned to her left and chose the second door in, opening it carefully and peering in; the door was clearly human in design, with a single doorknob, and the furniture beyond it was the same. It was comfortable-looking but certainly not luxurious, and everything was the same off-white as the walls. She stepped in, feeling particularly unclean in such an environment. The main room contained a soft armchair, an extra-tall twin-sized bed, a table with three simple metal chairs around it, a small kitchen area, and a pair of doors. The door on the right wall led to a simple yet clean bathroom and the one to the left opened into a closet, stocked with clothing that was too large but seemed to be pliable and clearly made to human standards.

She stripped quickly and stepped into the shower without bothering to unpack her stuff; the shower felt wonderful as the warm water made the doctor feel clean for the first time in several days. She scrubbed her hair, lacking shampoo, and then stepped out and looked around for towels.

A pleasantly warm draft wafted up from the floorboards, so Dr. Halsey gave up the search for a towel and stood there to let herself air-dry, which was accomplished very quickly. Ignoring her dirty clothing, she crossed to the closet and, out of curiosity, pulled on a pair of the too-large pants and shirt, both a light grey. They conformed to her skin once the fabric touched the heat of her skin; it was pleasantly tight but not constricting.

"Ma'am?" Fred tapped at her door; she opened it to admit him. He, too, was clean and freshly shaved, looking much more alert and relaxed than he had since she had first greeted him on Onyx. He had removed his armor in favor of the light grey clothing that was apparently meant to stretch as well; it clung to him like a second skin.

"Come in, Fred," she said warmly, stepping back; he glanced around her room and took a seat on the chair carefully. It took his weight

without complaint and he sat rim-rod straight. The others arrived shortly afterward, perching on chairs and the bed " or the floor, in Lucy's case " and they gathered to talk about their change in quarters.

"It will take fifty days, Keen Sacrifice says, to repair the Pelican. I would like to test-fly it at least once before we trust it to carry us out of Slipspace bubble, too," Fred started.

"That's 250 days in the real world," Linda commented quietly. "The war could be over by then."

"It could already be over," Dr. Halsey pointed out. "Our duty is to get back as quickly as possible."

They nodded. "Doctor, will you want to help with the repairs or survey the city?" Fred asked.

"I won't be much help on the Pelican," the woman assured him quickly. "You all know how to fix everything but the hardest problems " and I'm sure Keen Sacrifice will be helping you. I'd rather explore the city."

"You should take a guard. Chief." Mendez looked at Fred and nodded, though there was a surly light to his eyes. Being alone with the doctor meant she would probably continue to complain about being left out of the Spartan-III project. However, he wasn't strong enough to keep up with the Spartans if they were lifting heavy machinery and plates onto the Pelican. "We'll work by teams " Linda, Tom, and Lucy will have the day shift; Kelly and I will take the night shift." Having the two IIIs together would help them; they tended to get much more spazzy if separated, Fred had noted. Kelly wasn't the best choice to pair with them; Linda's quiet and competent air would help the pair steady themselves, hopefully.

"For now, eat and sleep. We'll need steady hands for the repair work."

They nodded and filed out of Dr. Halsey's room. Fred and Kelly had taken the two rooms closest to the branching hallway, the better to hear and intercept intruders. Tom and Lucy had taken rooms on Halsey's side of the hallway, which Mendez and Linda were on Kelly's.

Fred entered his room and crossed to the kitchen quickly. Rooting through the cupboards ended with a very satisfying dinner of roast chicken and vegetables, so the label said, with a cup of crisp, cool water to finish off. The food sat warmly in his stomach as he went to the bed, eyelids already drooping. The lack of noise, the secure feeling of the room, and Keen's promise of safety made him more willing to sleep deeply, restoring his exhausted reserves of strength.

He sunk into the bed once he had stripped and folded his clothes neatly on the bed-side stand. The pad was thick and soft, and the temperature was warm enough to require only a thin blanket like in training camp. He pulled the blanket to his chin and tucked his hands beneath his head, looking at the ceiling. As if understanding that he was going to sleep, the room's light panel in the ceiling dimmed until Fred's night-adjusted eyes could just make out the shadowy

edges of furniture.

Down the hallway, Lucy prodded her bed carefully and then sat on the edge. She had made a dinner of the ready-to-eat sliced turkey, with a side of mashed potatoes and gravy, and was ready to sleep now. She looked around the room â€" bigger than she was used to, and such a shade of whiteâ€" She sighed quietly to herself and stood, crossing to the door.

Tom had expected her; his door stood open slightly, inviting his sister in; she closed it softly behind herself. The room was an exact duplicate of hers, except for the aroma â€" Tom had clearly chosen the soup option on the menu. He was still eating when she came in and offered her a seat, but she shook her head and sat opposite to him.

"At least we'll be getting back fairly soon â€" better than sitting around and doing nothing," Tom said quietly. Lucy nodded. She wasn't sure what their reception would be, though; the IIs â€" and Dr. Halsey â€" clearly thought the two IIIs were too twitchy to trust. "They're just not used to us," Tom assured her, reading her mind again. She smiled slightly, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "Once we're back, we'll be either thrown into the war or there won't be any humanity left to fight for."

Lucy looked down at her small hands; the possibility of total extinction was very high, she knew. What would happen if they went back only to find that Earth, the last bastion of human defenses, had been burnt to a cinder? Would Keen Sacrifice bring them back here, to live out their days in comfort? She distrusted comfort; comfort meant there wasn't a battle, meant that she â€" and her fellow Spartan IIIs â€" were useless. Being useless wasn't the way Lucy lived her life, what there was of it.

"Since we're all alone for the first time in a while, what do you think of the IIs?" Tom asked her, calling her attention back to the present. She shrugged; they were stand-offish but obviously excellent warriors. They had the same sort of team coordination the IIIs did, only more personalized. They were also hackles-up about the III program; Kelly-087 was especially unforgiving of the III's twitchiness. It had been too long since their last medication dose; Lucy could almost feel her basic impulses to hunt and kill coming back, like they did before they went into battle. That's how you knew a mission was coming; the medication stopped a day or two before.

"Kurt would have known what to do," Tom sighed. They both missed their commander â€" after the wreck that had left them the only two of their groups alive, he had saved Lucy from psychological discharge, and paired her with Tom to be his right hand staff. He would have known how to explain the Spartan III program, and what it entailed â€" less stringent selection, Lucy knew, with more aggressive augmentation and training. The IIs hadn't seen battle until fourteen; Lucy had been destroying a Covenant ship-building facility at twelve. There were â€" had been â€" many more IIIs, with plans to expand the program. ONI wanted a hundred thousand IIIs within twenty years, if humanity lasted that long.

As it was, Dr. Halsey's apparent mothering of the IIs â€" they deferred to her almost as a commander â€" was being extended to the

IIIs. Lucy wasn't sure she liked the doctor; the older woman had been responsible for Kurt's training, but she was clearly of the opinion that safety lay in running. Lucy couldn't condone what she had done, after Kelly had revealed that Dr. Halsey had kidnapped the II to get her to safety. She couldn't even understand it. Kelly was obviously a soldier " she had been born and raised to the life, as had any Spartan, and wouldn't thank anyone from removing her from the front lines. Neither would Lucy, for that matter.

Being unable to speak didn't mean she couldn't fight. Lucy had tried to speak, but it simply didn't come; the words wouldn't get past her throat. Her last words had been to Tom. He remembered them clearly, but at least he didn't look at her with some sort of mingled pity and contempt, as so many others did. There was more pity in Dr. Halsey's gaze, and the contempt was for the program, not Lucy herself.

"Well, let's get some shut-eye while we can," Tom said, placing his dishes in the side of an open drawer; it retreated into the wall.

Lucy lay facing the wall, Tom's back to hers. It was their usual arrangement. Many of the trainers back on Onyx " Lucy forced down a deep feeling of loss " hadn't understood and had made many rude comments after learning that the two IIIs shared a bunk. They never did so in front of Kurt, of course, nor often Lucy or Tom themselves, but their supposed knowledge made them feel superior to the younger Spartans.

It wasn't just that Lucy wanted Tom's company, either; the comfort with taken and given mutually. Tom had nightmares without Lucy's presence behind him, while Lucy would lay awake and stare at the ceiling all night without his.

Lucy drifted into sleep quickly as the lights dimmed to a comfortable glow. Tom's soft breathing behind her made her almost think they were back on Onyx, sleeping in the room off of Kurt's, so he could summon them quickly. The echo of the larger space around them, however, shattered that quiet belief; their breathing died in the room instead of echoing back on the walls as the pair fell into a deeper slumber than they had managed recently.

## 2. Repairing the Pelican

\_Apologies for the long delay! Lots of homework. But I'm going to graduate a semester early, whoot!\_

\_Feel free to tap in with anything you want to say; I love love love reviews! \_

### Chapter 1: Repairing the Pelican

Fred frowned, inching the plate slightly higher. Beside him, unarmored so they could work closely, Kelly held the drill and was working quickly to rebolt the hatch into place. The holes weren't lining up perfectly, which probably meant that the hatch they'd found in the junkyard Keen had shown them to was from a newer model of Pelican. Linda, Tom, and Lucy had drilled new holes during the day before returning to repairing the wings, leaving the pair of IIs to bolt the door into place.

"A little lower," Kelly said. Fred nodded and lowered the hatch slightly, locking his armor in place when Kelly nodded to indicate the placement was good. She quickly drilled in the last bolt, heating the metal to expand it into the grooves and making the seal vacuum-proof.

Salvaging the parts for the Pelican had taken almost ten days of sifting through the enormous junkyard that lay just to the west of the city. The drones that piled it up and maintained the mountains of mostly trash hadn't organized the piles by creator, so they found Covenant ship pieces alongside UNSC-issue guns next to other bits and pieces that could have come from anything.

However, after nearly ten days and nights of slogging through the piles and bringing back pieces to try to fit to the Pelican, they had finally gathered enough scrap material to at least patch the wings and back hatch. There was nothing to do about the scratches and dents; they weren't compromising the ship's integrity, so they would stay. All of the humans preferred speed over beauty.

They were nearing the fifteen day mark now; Keen Sacrifice had managed to divert a couple of drones to accomplish the heaviest of the lifting and rewiring of the ship's fried systems. Fred estimated that the ship would be done within the next two days, nearly half the time Keen had said the repairs would take.

Speaking of the little blob of energy, Fred used his dorsal cameras to look at the Forerunner ancilla, who appeared to be watching them. Though it was clear that Dr. Halsey trusted the little machine, Fred had his doubts. Keen didn't tell them anything about the situation in the outside world. It had seemed very agitated when Fred questioned him about how, exactly, they were going to leave.

Kelly moved back and grunted. "Well, she won't win any beauty contests, but that door'll hold."

Fred nodded and released the hatch, stepping back as well. "Well, let's get in on the wing."

Kelly nodded and the pair went to the stubby wing. The repairs were going well there, too; Linda, Tom, and Lucy had managed to weld most of the repair plates in place during the day. They had left some of the largest for the pair of IIs since they would take the longest and the two IIIs were best with short projects. Fred raised one into place, matching it as neatly as possible. Kelly picked up the torch from its resting position on the side of the craft and flipped a visor over her eyes. Fred dimmed his visor as Kelly lit the welding torch and climbed on the wing to weld it from the inside.

They only managed to complete one plate but it was the largest and both had wanted to reinforce the welds to ensure it stayed on, since it would anchor several other plates of varying sizes. Keen had said that the ship would need to stand up to a lot of battering in the transition, and Fred wasn't taking any chances with the crew. The Mark IVs could stand vacuum for up to an hour, but the SPI armor the IIIs wore wouldn't stand up to the same abuse, and Dr. Halsey and Chief Mendez had no armor.

Fred and Kelly worked a bit with Linda and the IIIs when they came

out for their shift before retiring to their prospective rooms, exhausted. All of the Spartans were working themselves hard to get back to humanity; it was their duty to fight the Covenant, and they were stuck here repairing a ship.

Kelly's frustration mounted slightly as Keen whistled merrily on his way to escort Dr. Halsey and Chief Mendez into the city. The two non-Spartan humans had covered nearly every inch of the small city, with Keen serving as both tour guide and teacher. Privately, Kelly wondered why more drones couldn't have at least been assigned to combing the scrap yard for usable parts for the Pelican. There was probably a hatch that would actually fit, somewhere in those mountains of scrap metal, but the Spartans had taken the first one they came across and made it fit the bird.

Shrugging out of her clothing, Kelly stepped quickly into the shower, rinsing the sweat from her body. She didn't linger in the shower; too many years of being doused with ice cold water at sixty seconds had ingrained the quick shower response. Stepping from the tile onto the wooden floor, she let the wafts of pleasantly warm air dry her skin. Her hair was growing slightly longer than she liked it, Kelly noted as she glanced into the mirror. She opened a drawer under the sink and found, next to the toothbrush she had been using, a small electric razor. It hadn't been there the night before, but she was used to this room anticipating her needs by now.

She drew it out and flicked the on switch, leaning over the bowl of the sink to trim her hair down to one centimeter again. A dusting of brown hair coating the sink by the time she was done, and she rinsed it away after cleaning the razor and replacing it in the drawer. Her eyes were drifting slowly shut of their own accord, the warm draft of air lulling her body into sleepiness, as she brushed her teeth.

The Spartan made a quick detour to the kitchen for food before slipping between the light blanket and sheet. The room's lights were still dimming as Kelly lost herself to sleep.

"\_Ready?" The voice was one Kelly knew as well as her own; beside her, John's measured breathing matched her own, slightly quickened as they prepared to launch themselves out of the cover of the bushes.

—

"\_Ready," she murmured back. Before them, the apparently peaceful meadow was silent, the Pelican at the very center powered down. Around its base, supplies that the Spartans could sorely use were piled in neat little piles. Kelly recognized a package of her favorite MREs. \_

\_To their left, Sam and Linda were crouched; beyond them was another pair. In all, there were thirty Spartans encircling this meadow, fifteen pairs of two. The rest were back at the tunnels, guarding and scouting and hunting. \_

\_Though the air was bitter cold, a mixed blessing in that it meant there would be no fresh snow today, the Spartans all wore their training outfits, smeared with dirty snow to blend into the winter forest. Kelly felt the cold seep through her outfit where her body's heat had melted snow under her. \_

\_John and Kelly broke from cover at the same time, but Kelly's faster

speed pulled her quickly ahead. She could hear the soft sounds of the rest of the Spartans following their example, rushing the Pelican and supplies. \_

\_Several adults poured out of the ship's open hatch, clearly having hidden inside. John barked a quick command " the pairs split in unison, the faster of the two darting for the supplies while the other fifteen went for the six adults. \_

\_Kelly was first to the pile and grabbed as much as she could hold, slinging three backpacks onto her back and filling her pockets with smaller items. She stripped the pile she had chosen clean, stuffing some food into her mouth as she worked " her stomach could carry things just as easily as her arms. Once she was burdened down, and unable to run so quickly, she turned back for the forest, risking a glance over her shoulder at the Pelican's hatch where the trainers had been.\_

\_It was over quickly; the trainers had been armed with stun rounds, a step up from their usual numbing shots, but the smaller Spartan children only lost two to the initial volley before they were on their prey, their tiny frames executing kicks and punching with the accuracy and power of a fully grown adult. \_

\_John gathered Victor from where he had taken a stun round to the chest, pulling the small dart from his flesh and then heaving him back to the bushes. Another pair grabbed the other unconscious Spartan; Kelly couldn't tell who it was as they ran back towards the tunnels. \_

\_They managed to get under the snow before the whine of the Pelican told them that the trainers were continuing their search. It had been several days " six, by Kelly's counting " since they had been sent out and the blizzard had swept through the mountains. Rather than trudge back to camp, however, John and Fred had decided to dare the elements. That first night, four feet of snow had quickly accumulating, plenty deep enough for shallow tunnels. They had gathered in a tiny depression where the drifts were nearly eight feet deep, so that they could dig out room enough to stand up in. \_

\_It was to this headquarters that Kelly ran, going slowly both to ensure she stayed with John " you never abandoned your partner " with Victor's unconscious form slung across his back and to avoid spilling the supplies. Behind them, four teams would follow and erase their footsteps; they didn't want to be found. \_

\_By the time they arrived at the first entrance, John was panting, his breath steaming in the frigid air. Kelly held up the mat of woven branches and motioned for him to go first; John smiled briefly in thanks and pushed Victor in ahead of him, shoving the slightly smaller child as he crawled into the maze of tunnels the Spartans had constructed. \_

\_Kelly joined him, dropping the hatch closed behind her and pushing her supplies before her as well. They worked their way quickly and silently to the large chamber that served as both sleeping quarters and recreation. The small fire in the middle of the large cleared space was just enough to warm the area slightly, but not enough to melt the snow around them. The sides of the chamber had been reinforced with branches and clever application of heat to "ice"

sections, like the inside of an igloo. \_

\_Most of the Spartans were gathered there; the only ones not in attendance were on guard duty. One of their duties was to cover the hatches with fresh snow after they were used. \_

\_The children had waited for the last pair to arrive before tearing into the supplies. No one ate as they piled their loot carefully. Most of it was food; the best find came from one of Linda's two backpacks, a small iron stove with tripod. Now they would be able to make stews, stretching their hunted rabbits and pheasants further. There were several squares of plastic, which they spread in the sleeping corner over the branches they had used to lift the sleepers from the cold well in the center of the room.\_

\_There was also a set of cutlery, almost useless. The supplies they could not use, such as the cutlery, were packed into one of the side caves to be saved for later. They carefully counted up the food and then each took a small portion, leaving some for the guards and packing the rest in snowy niches around the room. \_

\_Victor and James slowly came around; sheepish for having been shot, they accepted their portions quietly and ate quickly. The food was cold but filled their stomachs pleasantly; the change of taste from over- or under-cooked rabbit, fowl, and pine needles was good enough to risk even the thick cheese substitute in the sandwiches.\_

\_Once everyone was done, John stood. The Spartans all looked to him and Fred for leadership, but Fred was out scouting. Kelly smiled slightly, catching his eye and nodding. He smiled back and addressed the group, his thin piping voice filling the silent room. \_

"\_They know we're still here and alive," he started without preamble. "They might assume some of us died in the cold." Everyone sniggered; true, they fought the cold daily, but no one had even gotten frostbite yet. "But they will be back. We'll double the guard and send a second set farther afield. They might try the supplies trick again, but they'll be better armed the next time."\_

\_Everyone nodded. Kelly snorted softly and John glanced at her, sitting down as she stood to speak. It was a system that worked well among them. \_

"\_They had stun rounds this time," Kelly reminded them. "We'll have to watch for that. They're getting pissed off that we keep beating them. We need to dig tunnels further out."\_

"\_If we dig farther, the adults might find us," Victor said quietly from the opposite side of the fire. \_

\_Kelly and John both nodded, as did many other Spartans. "So we make it a maze. We dig them small enough so no adult could crawl through them. We'll need to go farther to find food soon, anyway. We're stripping this area of the forest."\_

\_There were nods around the campfire. Everyone took turns hunting, and the lack of rabbits and pheasants was starting to be noticed.

\_

\_William stood and Kelly sat again, next to John, who touched her



hand gently. Their attention was drawn by the standing Spartan, who began cavorting around the fire and telling the tale of the attack to those who had not been there. Kelly laughed as he described Victor and James' "valiant attack," which made the two boys blush furiously. Will threw himself down with a dramatic groan, miming being shot by a stun round, onto Linda's lap, who laughed and playfully shoved him back to his feet.\_

\_As William entertained everyone with stories of their past exploits of the trainers â€" though most had lived them, they enjoyed Will's story-telling â€" Sam and Fhajad crept over to sit next to John and Kelly, grinning at them both. \_

The warmth of the small fire on her face, the solid presence of John to her right and Fhajad to her leftâ€¦ Kelly drifted into consciousness with none of her usual speed. For a disorienting moment, she thought she was there, under the snow and ice, her back pressed against Fhajad's chest and her arms shoved into the small space between her chest and John's back to keep her hands warm, Sam's fingertips on her side from where he slept nearly on top of Fhajad. Her legs were drawn up slightly; Fred and Will's weight were comfortably piled on top of her feet, keeping her toes warm. They slept sandwiched like that to conserve heat, Kelly remembered as she swam into full wakefulness.

The lights were still dim in her room as she sat up, but they slowly returned to a bright setting, letting her eyes adjust with them. The inviting smell that had partially roused her was coming from the kitchen â€" she walked quickly over and found that the computer that controlled the kitchen had made a breakfast for her of warm bread, soft butter, thick sausages that steamed, and several hard-boiled chicken eggs. She sat down before the feast, sipping first from the cold glass of milk that rose from the counter at her command.

She ate quickly, peeling the hard-boiled eggs efficiently and popping out the yellow yolks. She preferred the white parts; when they had hard-boiled eggs at training camp, she had given her yolks to John, who traded her for his whites. Kelly smiled softly at the memories, wondering what had sparked them. She hadn't thought about training camp â€" or John â€" for a while. Briefly, she wondered if he was still alive.

Shaking those thoughts from her head, she stood to get dressed, slipping the comfortably simple clothing over her bulky frame. She adjusted the shirt slightly around her chest â€" she dislike the way it showed off her breasts â€" and walked into the hallway. The clanging from the repair room that had been blocked by her door drew her into the large bay, where the two IIIs were attacking a plate with hammers. Linda was holding it in place as they pounded it into shape. Kelly eyed them briefly; they seemed to be completely engrossed in their task, and they weren't twitching, but Kelly wasn't quite up to trusting them completely yet.

"Hey, Kelly," Linda called from under the wing. "We could use your help if you want to get into your armor. This wing is just about done."

"Sure," Kelly answered, turning back to her room. Her armor was where she had left it, on the rack that had materialized out of the wall on the first day here. The room â€" she didn't have trouble accepting

that it could read her mind somehow â€" helped her into the bulky armor, aligning pieces onto her limbs and torso and tightening bolts where necessary. She stuck her helmet on her head and heard the neck collar hiss as it closed the final seals.

Her HUD flickered the life and she took a moment to run through a routine diagnostic of the armor. There were a few scrapes and scratches, from the last battle on Onyx, but nothing that threatened the integrity of the suit.

Kelly went back to the hangar and followed Linda's instructions to weld the now-shaped plate onto its neighbors and the frame. Lucy and Tom were shifting through the pile of scrap metal at the edge of their workspace to find another plate. The IIs worked together seamlessly, strengthening the welds and rocking the Pelican to ensure the wing was firmly attached.

Fred came out a few moments later, already in his armor, and the five Spartans worked quickly together. Linda, Tom, and Lucy were flagging, however, having spent all day lifting those heavy plates into place and pounding them into shape, so Fred and Kelly sent them to their rooms for well-deserved sleep.

One of the drones appeared through one of the ventilation shafts at the top of the high-ceilinged room and floated down to Kelly's eyelevel, staying warily out of reach. It chirped at her and she turned around to see what it wanted. It extended a leg carefully, almost as if it expected her to rip it off; in its "hand" was a small piece of something electrical.

"I give. What is it?" Kelly asked the drone.

It chirped and dared to float off a little, beckoning. Kelly sighed quietly, wishing they would just speak, and followed it into the Pelican from the back hatch, where it floated above the control panel.

"Alright, what do you want?" Kelly asked as she squeezed herself into the cockpit. In answer, it tugged at a panel on the control board; the Spartan noted that it had been welded shut. She nodded in understanding and the drone trilled happily as she went back out for a cutting torch. It was the work of a moment to get the panel off; then the drone moved in, almost shoving her out of the way â€" if it could have â€" in its eagerness.

She left the drone to play with the control board and went back to the wing. Fred was patiently waiting, holding the piece in place. "What did it want?" he asked.

Kelly shrugged, taking up her hammer again and carefully pounding the steel into shape. "It wanted into the control panel, but couldn't cut through the welds, I guess."

Fred nodded. "Careful â€" there's a sharp edge there," he warned; Kelly pounded it flat.

\_~Across the city, two days later~\_

"Why were the Forerunners unable to stock this Sphere with samples of sentient life?" Dr. Halsey asked Keen Sacrifice as she sat on a very

human-looking bench.

Keen zipped up slightly, his voice nervous as he avoided the question. "Surely you'd like to see the surrounding countryside today," he insisted. Halsey knew the ancilla was an "it" more than a "he," but it was hard to think of the machine as not being male.

Chief Mendez stood slightly closer to the building behind Halsey, constantly surveying. He clearly wasn't comfortable "still" with the empty city and Keen Sacrifice. The little ancilla made sure not to get within his reach, remembering how Kelly had snatched him out of the air when he brought them to this place.

"Are you sure you don't want to answer my question?" Dr. Halsey asked, turning her attention from her laptop to the hovering machine.

The small eye turned away, focusing into the distance. "Will you pardon me? Something requires my attention. Please, explore as you like. I shall find you in one of your hours."

Dr. Halsey huffed to herself as the little machine turned away and sped off; she opened her laptop and pulled up her notes on the city. Thus far, she and Chief Mendez had explored most of the buildings surrounding the hangar in which the Spartans worked.

All of them were empty. Most were clearly designed as living spaces for sentient beings, though even just the variety of beds fascinated Dr. Halsey. Most were human-like in design, though some were small enough for a doll and others large enough for a fully-armored Spartan or two. There were entire buildings filled with water, clearly meant for an aquatic life; when she entered, a bubble of protective air rose around her, keeping her and Chief Mendez dry as they explored the building.

Chief Mendez was clearly not as excited about the buildings as Dr. Halsey was. The older man was surly and clearly unhappy about babysitting the doctor on her exploration. They had yet to come across anything alive in the city.

"Let's head back," Dr. Halsey suggested with a sigh, closing her laptop and standing. Chief Mendez was still scanning the street and sky, clearly looking for some sort of threat. He didn't trust peace and quiet. He, like her Spartans, had grown up with war, lived for it, even.

They trooped in silence back to the hangar, where they found all five Spartans hard at work putting the finishing touches on the Pelican. Dr. Halsey climbed into the cockpit and found the inside stripped to accommodate for large chairs welded rudely into place that would hold the IIs in their armor. There were also four slightly smaller chairs from the original craft welded into the place. The pilot chair had been removed.

Fred sent Tom, Lucy, and Linda out to get a proper rest while he and Kelly climbed into the pelican with Chief Mendez and Dr. Halsey. "It's all repaired," Fred said quickly, pulling off his helmet. The space was already decidedly cramped. "Are we ready for a test flight?"

Dr. Halsey nodded. "How are we going to get the ship out of here?"

"Perhaps I can offer some assistance?" Keen Sacrifice floated out of a ventilation shaft with several drones in tow. "If you would like, we will transport this ship to the landing pad outside the city."

"How?" Fred asked. "The roof doesn't contract, does it?"

"No," Keen Sacrifice admitted. "However, these drones can fly it to the landing zone without starting its engines here, which will save both time and energy on your part."

"Alright, do it," Dr. Halsey ordered, sounding slightly miffed at the ancilla. Fred raised an eyebrow in curiosity; the doctor shook her head slightly.

The Pelican rose silently as each of the four onboard set their feet so as to not be knocked off by the gentle motion. They were silent for the two minutes it took before the ship bumped onto a concrete landing pad.

Dr. Halsey ran through the Pelican's built-in diagnostics as soon as they were on solid ground. The Pelican rumbled to life once every system checked out and Dr. Halsey lifted the Pelican slowly. Fred and Kelly circled the interior of the ship, banging on anything that seemed loose to see if they could shake it. The rear hatch, however, remained steady and strong, even when Kelly put her full weight against it.

They flew around the city a few times as Halsey checked the responses of the wings, flaps, and landing gears. The weapons had been removed by the drones; Keen Sacrifice explained that weapons had no place in the Sphere. Their empty guns had remained, however; without bullets, they were useful as clubs, and they made the Spartans more at ease.

"Everything checks out," Dr. Halsey said as they touched back down on the landing pad. "Now we just have to figure out how we'll get out of here." She turned expectantly to Keen Sacrifice, who had spent the testing period silently hovering just over her left shoulder.

"Yes, of course," he said. "You will want to be well-rested and fed before we make the trip, however. It is not a pleasant experience. My drones will open a portal above this city tomorrow and we shall leave here, if that is still what you wish."

"Of course it is," Fred answered. "How long will it take to pass through?"

"Moments, as your body will measure time. Will you set a destination?"

"Earth," Dr. Halsey answered immediately.

Keen Sacrifice made a two-tone negative sound. "Unfortunately, my coding does not allow me to send anything from the Dyson Sphere close to any inhabited planet. To protect against misuse, you

understand."

"Of course," Dr. Halsey snapped, turning back to the control panel in frustration. "What about Oyx?"

"It is patrolled by the Covenant."

"Are there any planets you can get us to that can sustain our life if we should set down on the surface and transmit a Mayday signal?" Dr. Halsey asked.

Keen Sacrifice beeped softly, almost in apology. "I will prepare a list if you like, Dr. Halsey."

"Do so, and transmit it to my laptop. For now, we'll take that rest you talked about." She opened the back hatch; with the mismatched doors, it groaned as it opened, but they all walked out into the dim twilight quickly, eager to get out of the cramped interior of the bird.

"We'll need supplies," Kelly said quietly, following the group back into the city.

"Let's get those together and pack the Pelican tonight," Fred suggested. His sister nodded slightly.

"It's been seventeen days here â€" that's eighty-five days in the real world. Eighty-eight by the time we get out of here. Things could have changed."

Fred nodded. "We'll have to hope for the best, and hope our Mayday signal is picked up by something friendly."

"That's a lot of hope," Kelly pointed out, grinning slightly.

Fred shrugged. "Spartan luck will pull us through. You'll see."

Kelly's smile dropped slightly. John had always been the luckiest Spartan â€" though certainly above average in height, speed, strength, hearing, and all those other augmented characteristics they were known for, it was his luck that set him apart. That and his leadership.

Fred noticed and clapped his sister on the shoulder. "Who knows, maybe John'll be the one to find us."

"If he's not dead," Kelly reminded her brother sourly. Fred winced slightly; he was the most empathetic of the Spartans. The brown-haired woman shook her head slightly. "Sorry, Fred." She briefly thought about saying "sir" but decided not to; they were speaking as comrades and brother to sister, not Private to Lieutenant.

"It's alright," he responded. "You're probably right." They had dropped back slightly; Dr. Halsey and Chief Mendez were already lost in the buildings ahead. "There aren't many of us left now."

Kelly nodded, remembering her brothers and sisters lost to the war and their augmentations. "Sometimes, I wonder if we aren't it," she

said softly.

"The last Spartans?" Fred asked.

Kelly shook her head. "The last humans," she clarified. "What if we lost the war in the past eighty-five days? What if there is no friendly force to pick up our Mayday?"

"Then we'll take out as many Covenant we can before we join our brothers and sisters," Fred said firmly. Kelly grinned quietly, her white teeth flashing in the deepening dark. "Have some faith, little sister."

"Little?" Kelly smacked him upside the head â€" gently, because he wasn't wearing a helmet. He smirked back at her.

"I choose to think of you as younger." Unspoken between them was the knowledge that they didn't actually know when they had been born, but it made a pleasant fantasy to think they did. "And since I'm CO here, what I says, goes."

"Yes, big brother, sir," Kelly teased. "But if we want to get that Pelican loaded before you turn into an old man, sir, we'd better get going."

"Old man, is it?" He put his helmet on and took off; Kelly raced after him, putting her helmet on as well.

Dr. Halsey heard the two Spartans pounding up to her and turned slightly. They dashed by without slowing. Chief Mendez stiffened slightly and then relaxed; if anything had been wrong, someone would have radioed.

"They're just running off some energy," Dr. Halsey said softly behind him.

Mendez grunted. He wasn't sure he wanted to be alone with Dr. Halsey any more. After prying almost every unclassified secret about the III program from him, and several classified ones she had guessed at, she had stopped badgering him about the program, but her disapproval was clearly evident and he disliked the high-and-mighty attitude she carried about herself like a cloak.

He was too aware of the importance of Dr. Halsey to humanity â€" and especially to the Spartans â€" to leave her in an unknown place without a guide, so he slowed his steps to keep just ahead of her. She was silent as they walked, which suited the older man.

They would be leaving tomorrow, Chief Mendez knew. Back toâ€" something. They didn't know what; Keen Sacrifice wouldn't tell them what waited on the outside. They knew the Covenant still controlled Onyx, at least. But was humanity gone? Was there still a war going on, or had his kind been wiped away?

It was frustrating not to know, and he disliked trying to think about what they would do if they returned to a galaxy without humans. Would Keen Sacrifice bring them back to live out their days in peace? Chief Mendez hated the idea. He wasn't built for peace; none of them were. Even Halsey had spent her life devoted to war, or at least the science behind its soldiers.

Mendez kept his ears and eyes open for threats, but after the past two weeks, the silence and emptiness of the city continued trying to lull him into thinking they were in a secured area. He could have walked easily if he had a handful of scouts and guards on the highest rooftops; but he didn't, so he walked carefully and kept his sense alert.

Kelly and Fred trotted past them, nodding in greeting but without stopping, just as the pair reached the hangar building. Their arms were piled with boxes of what Mendez guessed had to be supplies. He was glad they were stocking the bird; he disliked the idea of landing on a strange planet without anything but their empty guns and a grounded bird. They had enough fuel for a few scouting trips, which meant that if Keen Sacrifice popped them out in space, it would take everything the bird had to land safely.

Not for the first time, Mendez wondered why they needed the bird at all. They had gotten in without anything around them the first time. It had felt like he was being torn apart, yes, but he had survived, without major injury. When he had asked, Keen had said something about nodes and degenerated into science-babble that Dr. Halsey had been fascinated by but bored the Chief.

Once they got to the back of the building and their rooms, Mendez left Halsey to see to the list of possible planets Keen has promised and went to take another shower. If they were leaving, he wanted to remember the feeling of hot water pummeling the aches out of his aging and abused joints.

\_~Across the hall~\_

Tom and Lucy silently stared at the chess board in front of them. It was an ancient game that Kurt had taught the IIIs to teach tactics and strategy. The moves were ridiculously simple, and the pieces much more limited than the more modern chess-like games they were used to, but they had managed to carve these pieces from pieces of scrap metal from the junk yard on their resting periods. It felt like a tribute to their commander, who had given his life to see them safely into the Sphere.

Lucy moved her pawn forward; Tom countered with his knight, leaving his queen apparently unguarded. But when Lucy moved to take it, Tom's eyes lit in triumph and Lucy realized too late her mistake in leaving her king unguarded. His knights quickly cornered the piece and then his castle delivered the final blow.

"Good game," he said quietly, setting the pieces back up. It was their third game of the night, and they had tied the other two, eventually coming down to king vs. king.

Lucy nodded quietly, gently setting her knocked-over king back on its feet. The pieces were roughly carved and hardly recognizable except for the difference in coloring. Covenant purple formed the majority of Tom's pieces, while Lucy's were in the dark steel grey of UNSC ships. The smallest were the pawns; the tallest, the kings.

"Want to play again?"

Lucy shook her head. Playing just brought back memories of playing

against Kurt during quiet evenings at the training camp when the next generation of IIIs were out training or otherwise occupied. She missed her commander's quiet tips and pointers. He never lost, though she had once managed to force a tie between them. Most especially, she missed the way he understood her silence and didn't pity or hate her for it. Tom was different â€" he was her brother. But the IIs kept looking at her like she was broken. Maybe she was. She sometimes felt like it.

Tom nodded and picked up the board to put it in one of the drawers. Lucy crossed to the kitchen and perused the menu. She wasn't especially hungry but she felt a hankering for something. Tom saw her dilemma and chuckled quietly. "How about a Spartan Special?" he asked. Lucy grinned hesitantly before nodding. It had been years since the pair had enjoyed a Spartan Special.

Tom ordered the ingredients as Lucy dug out deep-dish bowls and spoons. She remembered how the food â€" it was hard to classify what exactly the Spartan Special was â€" had come to be.

It was silent in the camp, but Lucy didn't let that fool her. It didn't fool the other IIIs around her, either. They lay in the damp grass, the rain pattering the bushes over their heads, silent and still. \_

The pair of guards trooped past, heads bent in the miserable weather. The dog with them tucked her tail between her legs and whined quietly, just as unhappy with the weather as the humans. She glanced up when the bitch thought she had caught a scent, but it drowned in the rain and she plodded onward. \_

Lucy felt one of her comrades coming up next to her, quietly. She turned slightly; Jackie had crept up on her and was holding out something that steamed. Lucy took it with a quick smile of silent thanks, and Jackie smiled in return before working her way back to bring food to the next scout. \_

The wet Spartan examined what she had been given. A thick paste; it was made of pine bark, rabbit fat, and the last of their trail bars. She choked it down, grateful for the fuel and for the warmth. \_

They would move under the cover of darkness. This had been the last of their scavenged food, and the constant drones overhead made hunting almost impossible, both because the hunters couldn't be seen and because it scared every game animal for miles around. The unusually wet weather had drowned most of the edible plants, washing away whole hills in deadly landslides. They had lost two brothers in one of them. \_

The stars moved slowly overhead. All had agreed to move only when the bright red star of a nearby sun was directly overhead. Lucy estimated that she had only an hour left to wait and she slowly stretched her toes and fingers, limbering herself and keeping them from freezing. She had to be quick and sure to top that wire fence.  
\_

The hour crept by and then chaos suddenly exploded to her right. That was the signal; Lucy darted to her feet and refused to listen to the shouts coming from the direction of the explosion. She ran for the fence, her heart pounding in her ears. In the distance, she heard



someone cry out in pain, and a dog barking madly before the sound was suddenly cut out with a yelp. \_

\_Then she hit the fence and could think of nothing but climbing it. Lucy scaled it quickly, hissing slightly as the barbed wire at the top caught and tore her hands and face, but she was over and in the encampment. \_

\_She heard the fence rattle off to her left where someone else was climbing it as Lucy took off for the large warehouse just in front of her, rolling into the shadows. The camp's attention was focused on the source of the explosion and she couldn't hear anything from inside the thin sheet-metal walls. Risking herself only slightly, she rose on her tiptoes and peered through a window. The inside of the warehouse was dark, but it wouldn't stay so for long. This was where the trainers stashed their weapons. \_

\_Another Spartan joined her in the shadows. "Let's go!" Hector hissed, cupping his hands together. Lucy nodded and used the cradle to propel herself through the window, crashing through the glass loudly. She landed atop a crate and felt the pinpricks of several pieces of glass in her arms. Ignoring the pain, she reached through the window and lifted Hector in after her. He ran off immediately, but she waited for the rest of their five-man team. \_

\_The others were there quickly; she pulled each one in and they set to looting the place. Hector had found backpacks and they stuffed these with ammunition. Another team would be getting food, they all knew, so they ignored the remains of a hastily-left meal except to snatch a handful of food for themselves. \_

\_Once they were each burdened just enough to escape quickly, they all trooped out a side door and sprinted again for the fence. The camp was quieter, though the trainers were shouting back and forth, trying to locate the source of the disturbance. \_They are in for a rude awakening\_, Lucy thought as she raced back towards the fence.\_

\_The girl caught a flash of green in front of her and instinctively rolled as a trainer yelled and attacked. He was unarmed and the five children quickly managed to silence him without more than that initial shout.\_

\_It had been enough, though. Lucy heard answering shouts behind them as they turned again, and the barking of a dog was quickly getting louder. "Go!" she yelled, abandoning silence and stealth. \_

\_They all ran faster, straight for the fence. The five children swarmed over it just as the dog reached the bottom, barking madly as his prey escaped beyond where he could reach. He dug at the edge of the fence but it had been continued into the ground against the children doing such a thing. \_

\_Lucy and her four Spartans disappeared into the brush and continued running in the darkness until they were sure they had lost any chance of pursuit. Still, they were too cautious to go straight back to camp and took a series of confusing game trails to further muddy their scent. They walked up a stream and then, finally, Lucy turned them towards headquarters. \_

\_The cave the children had chosen was warm and at least moderately

dry, though hardly large enough to fit all of them " only fifty in this group, the other two hundred and fifty elsewhere on the planet running the same exercise.\_

\_They were greeted with challenges at the first layer of perimeter security, which sounded like the hoot of an owl. Lucy whistled back the counter-signal in the quiet tones of a chickadee and they were passed on through the layers of guards. Each time they were spotted and challenged, Lucy returned the proper counter-signal. It was elaborate protection but made for a safer camp. They slept easily at night, or at least as easily as any Spartan did. \_

\_They walked into the cave with relief, taking the twisting turns " narrow at first before opening slightly " into the large inner cavern. The cave was crowded; Lucy's extra-cautious nature meant they were the last back.\_

"\_What'd you get?" Tom asked eagerly, stepping forward. Lucy tossed him her pack. \_

"\_Open it and find out," she teased, sitting next to the fire to dry herself out. Her pack of four did the same, tossing packs to those who were already dry and sitting next to the fire. \_

"\_Ooo, is it my birthday?" Horace chuckled from the other side of the fire as he took out the sticks of dynamite Timmy had managed to grab before leaving. They all grinned, knowing the magic their brother could work with the stuff. \_

"\_And we rigged the building to blow," Lucy told the gathered children. They all nodded happily. \_

"\_We have plenty of food for the next few days, if we're careful," Tom told them as he set aside Lucy's pack. Horace fell on it immediately but sat back in disappointment when he found no more explosives, only rounds of ammunition and a few pistols. "Unfortunately, it's slightly squished," Tom continued. \_

\_They had sent fifteen " half their force " after food, and five others had gone after clothing and sleeping bags. They hadn't lost anyone, Lucy noted as she counted those around her. The sea of eight-year-olds was quiet as they listened to the tally Tom began.

\_

\_Once that was done, they all dug into the new food. Lucy found a tub of chocolate ice cream " almost melted " and a handful of grapes buried deep in the packs, nearly smashed to pulp. She gathered some blueberries and traded her ration of rabbit meat to Horace for his handful of chocolate pieces. Then she rooted out a packet of dried grapes " raisins, she remembered they were called, and one of her favorite foods " and dumped the fruit into the soupy ice cream.

\_

\_Tom noticed her stirring her "pot" and came over to see what she was doing. "It's chocolate ice cream, chocolate pieces, raisins, grapes, and blueberries," she explained. Those nearest, upon hearing, laughed. It was a mixture that would guarantee a lot of energy in a short time period, but wouldn't last. It was unpractical, but it was also interesting and new.\_

"\_It's a surprising mix," Tom told her. She raised a full spoon to her lips and felt all the children watching as she tried it.

—

"\_It's good!" she exclaimed. She freely passed it around and everyone tried a mouthful, though most disagreed. \_

\_Tom rolled his eyes in laughter as she took it back when everyone had had a chance to taste it, eating the rest with blissful mutterings. "It's a Lucy Surprise," he chuckled. \_

"\_A Spartan Surprise," she corrected him, her lips dark with the chocolate ice cream. She licked them clean. \_

"\_A Spartan Surprise," they all echoed, laughing quietly. \_

From then on, Lucy remembered, her food experimentations â€" often disastrous failures â€" were called Spartan Surprises, but the first chocolate ice cream mixture forever remained \_the\_ Spartan Surprise. It no longer bothered her that she couldn't remember the sound of her own voice when she thought about those days of training.

Tom plunked down a tub of chocolate ice cream in front of her, with packets of raisins, full grapes, chocolate chunks, and blueberries next to it. He had even crushed the grapes for her. She smiled up at him and he grinned back slightly, taking his own meal â€" a much simpler crocket of plain strawberry ice cream â€" from the food-producing cupboard.

Lucy let the ice cream in front of her melt, helping it along by mixing it with a spoon. Tom was finished eating by the time the ice cream was mostly melted; he went to wash his hands and put his dishes away as the woman mixed in her fruit and then started in on the whole tub.

Ice cream was a rare delicacy and Lucy didn't really like the cold stuff, but melted, she enjoyed the rich tastes. It reminded her of simpler times, when the world had come down to executing an order. Ever since she and Tom had survived Operation: TORPEDO, her world hadn't been so simple. She had been a trainer under Kurt for the Gamma Company. Idly, she wondered if any of Gamma Company still lived. Lucy also wondered if any humans still survived outside their sphere.

"What're you thinking about?" Tom asked. Lucy glanced at him and shrugged. "Come on, Luce."

Lucy frowned slightly and then gestured to the wall separating their room from the hallway and then more broadly at the ceiling.

Tom nodded. "'When we get out, will there be any humans left?'" he translated softly. Lucy nodded. "I don't know," he answered. "But we have a duty to find out. If not, we'll take out as many Covenant as we can. Or maybe we'll come back here and restart the race." Lucy snorted and rolled her eyes; Tom laughed. "I know, we won't. We'll avenge our race. And if there are humans still left, we'll defend them. Like we always have. It'll be nice to be back in the battle instead of on the sidelines."

Lucy frowned slightly, trying to hide her uneasiness with a large

mouthful of Surprise. Tom, of course, wasn't fooled. He sighed and locked eyes with her, almost challengingly. "We aren't meant to be trainers," he told her. "We outlived everyone in our team because we're either damn lucky or unlucky â€" I haven't decided which." Lucy silently agreed with the latter choice. "But we can't just sit back on our heels while humans could well be dying around us. I know you don't like the stares." Lucy glanced down briefly. "But you're going to have to endure them. Or speak. It's up to you."

Lucy shook her head slightly. She couldn't speak; it wasn't that she didn't \_want\_ to, she just couldn't. Tom was the one who understood her the most and he still wasn't entirely convinced.

Tom nodded slightly. "Well, chances are, there isn't anyone left," he reminded her with false cheerfulness. "So you won't have to talk anyway. I doubt those Covenant bastards would mind."

Lucy shrugged. They had no weapons, unless Keen Sacrifice had a stash somewhere. She privately had her doubts about the ancilla.

They both turned towards the door when someone knocked; Tom called an invitation to enter, and Fred stepped into their room, letting the door swing shut behind him. His bulky green armor still impressed the IIIs. Lucy recalled Kurt's decision to wear SPI armor instead of his own MJOLNIR in his last battle. It wouldn't have made a difference, she knew, but she couldn't help but remember.

"Sir." Both IIIs stood to salute but Fred waved them back to their seats.

"Stay seated. I just came to tell you we will be leaving tomorrow. The Pelican is ready. We've stocked it. We'll have to drop out on a planet that isn't inhabited, but Dr. Halsey is confident that we can send out a Mayday signal and get picked up."

The IIIs blinked and exchanged a glance. "And if there isn't anything friendly waiting for us, sir?" Tom asked quietly.

"Then we'll take it out," Fred said firmly. "Get rested tonight. Apparently the transition back isn't pleasant."

He left them to their own devices and headed down the hall. He and Kelly had finished packing the Pelican and taken their second-to-last showers. If it was one thing he would miss, it would be showers. Fred didn't like the quiet and seeming peace of the empty city around them, and distrusted silence, but showers â€" those small luxuries â€" meant "safety" to him far more than a city devoid of life.

### 3. Let's Get the Hell Outta Dodge

\_Please note: Gamma Company's Spartan IIIs are assumed dead in this fic. Team Katana died - in the first chapter, Keen Sacrifice references his creator, who left with children going back to war, and since he can't contact his predecessor, Keen assumes (rightly) that they're dead. Sorry that wasn't obvious. Again, this is an AU â€" Alternate Universe â€" story. It was also written before Cortana was revealed rampant in Halo 4.\_

\_I refer to Keen Sacrifice as "Keen" because his predecessor was

"Sacrifice."\_

**\*\*Chapter 2: Let's Get the Hell Outta Dodge\*\***

Fred eyeballed his troops â€" the two IIIs were sitting in their seats, not fidgeting for once, but calmly strapped into place. Chief Mendez and Dr. Halsey were on opposite sides of the Pelican; they had argued again. About what, Fred didn't know, but he had a feeling it was connected to Tom and Lucy. Kelly and Linda were closest to the hatch, crouched awkwardly as they tested the seals for the final time. Keen Sacrifice was humming to himself in a corner.

"Is everyone ready?" Fred asked, looking around. The four Spartans nodded mutely; Dr. Halsey waved her hand in agreement â€" at least Fred took it that way â€" and Chief Mendez answered with a quiet, "Yes, sir."

"Oh, this is so exciting," Keen giggled, settling onto the floor next to Dr. Halsey's shoes like a dog. "The drones are beginning the portal opening process."

"Then we're getting the hell outta Dodge," Kelly muttered. "Finally." She and Linda strapped into their seats and gave Fred a thumbs up to indicate they were properly stowed.

"Hands and feet in at all times," Fred muttered over the comm to his sisters. They swiped him a quick Spartan smile as he buckled into the pilot's seat. "Preparing to launch."

He flicked all the right switches quickly and the bird came to life around them with a slow rumble. Keen had finally stopped humming and sat on the floor patiently.

Fred carefully lifted the Pelican off the ground and aimed it at a point above the center of the city. Keen Sacrifice had promised that the drones could open a slipspace hole â€" or something like it â€" to get out. Normally, Pelicans weren't equipped for Slipspace jumps, which was why Dr. Halsey and Chief Mendez were surrounded by the Spartans in their armor. It would be a bumpy ride out.

The Forerunner ancilla had also started the creation process for his successor, who would form within the next few "days" in the world and wait for the next group to come barging into the Shield World. Fred doubted anyone would come â€" if humanity wasn't wiped out yet, the Covenant would certainly be doing everything they could to eradicate humans, leaving no time for scientists to be digging in Onyx's burned earth.

Outside the Dyson Sphere, eighty-eight days had passed. Onyx was definitely burned to a crisp; the Spartans, Fred knew, were likely labeled MIA, as were Dr. Halsey and the trainers at the Spartan III camp.

"The portal is up now," Keen Sacrifice murmured from his spot between Dr. Halsey's feet. Fred looked through the cockpit's windshield towards the coordinates Keen had given him; sure enough, the dark hole ringed in blue that indicated a Slipspace hole.

"Lock down, everyone. Here we go." Fred nudged the joystick and braced himself as the ship bounced forward into Slipspace.

The ship groaned and creaked around them; they were all silent. For some reason " Fred didn't know all the science jargon that had passed between Dr. Halsey and Keen Sacrifice about the rupture, especially since most of it was Forerunner in origin " it would take only a few moments to pass through to the chosen planet, which was far from Earth. This satisfied both Keen Sacrifice's rule that they couldn't jump out close to inhabited planets " which meant Earth was inhabited, though Keen refused to say by what species " and the Cole Protocol.

Fred leaned back in his chair as it creaked and popped. He felt a jolt " something sheared off and alarms rang through the cockpit.

"We lost the wing," Fred said calmly through the comms. The Spartans all winced " they were supposed to come out a few thousands meters above the ground. Dr. Halsey pulled Keen Sacrifice into her lap and held him there, though the ancilla would probably survive a crash better than the frail-looking doctor.

Another rumble tore through the ship, accompanied by several pings that meant the hull was straining. "Just a few more of your seconds," Keen Sacrifice trilled loudly, his microphone muffled slightly by Dr. Halsey's shirt.

Fred leaned forward to take control of the Pelican as they burst through another hole in Slipspace. Below, he could see a vast expanse of green forests. This planet had been deemed habitable by Keen Sacrifice and Dr. Halsey " it hadn't been inhabited by humanity due to the extremely lethal creatures that lived on the planet. It was in a backwards quadrant " Dr. Halsey couldn't pull up any references to the planet except for the warning about indigenous life-forms.

The jungle that covered all land masses, of which there was one larger than the continent of Africa and a bunch of island chains. The indigenous flora almost matched Earth's ancient rainforests that used to cover what had been Brazil on the coast of South America, but the creatures that lived here were almost all lethally poisonous, though nothing was smaller than the beavers in Earth's museums.

There were legless reptilian beasts that resembled the boa constrictors of Earth, but large enough to strangle an elephant-sized carnivore. The exploratory team who came had bugged out almost immediately after catching video clips of the food chain, which they became a part of almost immediately.

They immediately plummeted into the planet's 1.3 gee environment. The gravity dragged at Fred as he fought for control of the Pelican. The stubby wing was gone and they began spinning " slowly at first, but eventually the forces started dragging the supplies stacked in the middle of the Pelican out towards the edges, pressing against the Spartans' knees.

"Hold on," Fred grunted through his external speakers. He fired the emergency thrusters and dragged the bird's nose up, though she was ass-heavy thanks to the load of Spartans in the rear. They fell.

Fred aimed the Pelican as a shallow hill, sloping away from them, and kept firing the thrusters. The low-fuel warning alarm beeped, joining the cacophony of warning signs and lights and sounds emitted from around him. He punched a button to silence them all " the bird wasn't going to survive. He wasn't sure about Dr. Halsey or the Chief, either, both unarmored.

Fred swore to himself as the bird fought him, digging its nose downward again. He fired the emergency thrusters off the nose once more and heard the tank rattle on empty as they all tilted back again. The ground thumped against the bottom of the Pelican with an angry roar and Fred immediately hit the brake thrusters, using up every last bit of fuel.

They he hung on, lifting his arms to guard his visor. The windshield, designed to withstand a good barrage of bullets, shattered on impact and peppered Fred's armor. "Cover your head," he yelled, hoping those behind him could hear.

They bounced, jarring Fred against his seat. He heard it crack under his weight and shift, but the extra welded bonds held him. Behind him, he heard a muffled curse from Dr. Halsey, but couldn't turn to look.

The Pelican's nose dug into the ground, plowing up dirt around them and into Fred's face. His armor automatically sealed to prevent the dust from entering his lungs. The hiss seemed unnaturally loud in his ear, against the roaring around him.

They finally dragged to a stop; the ship groaned as it finally settled, Fred up to his hips in dirt. He unfolded his arms and unbuckled himself quickly, wading through the dirt back to his team.

He immediately knew something was wrong. Dr. Halsey sat slumped in her chair, Keen Sacrifice murmuring in concern from inside the circle of her arms. Her left shoulder, facing him, was dark red with blood.

Fred immediately jumped into action, pulling his gloves off and grabbing the first aid kit from the cockpit. "Set up a perimeter," he barked at Linda and Kelly as they started forward as well. Tom and Lucy snapped to Chief Mendez's side; he was clearly disoriented and Lucy held his neck still as Tom checked for any injuries.

"Dr. Halsey, can you hear me?" Fred gently opened her arms and leaned her back. He winced; there was a bunch of small pieces of plexi stuck in her scalp, not deep but bleeding, and a larger one in her upper arm. As soon as he was free, Keen Sacrifice darted out of the ship and hovered above Linda's head, who was circling the perimeter. Fred had Kelly farther out, probably scouting.

He focused on Dr. Halsey. She hadn't lost much blood yet, but it became apparent that she was in danger as he pulled out the large piece of glass and immediately clamped a handful of gauze over her arm. He wrapped his large hand around her arm to hold the gauze to it, her frail limb limp in his grip. Fred pulled a knife from his thigh pocket and quickly cut her jacket's arm off, lifting his hand briefly to assess the bleeding.

Beside him, Fred heard Lucy pulled Mendez gently into her arms, Tom holding his head still. He protested weakly but they carried him out silently, laying him on the springy grass a few feet away. Lucy stayed to hold his neck straight and keep him from walking; Tom came back to Fred.

"What can I do?" he asked softly, already reaching for the sterilizing agent.

"Clean it out. I'll get the sutures ready." The III nodded and set to work, gently teasing out pieces of glass and using the small cauterizing agent to burn closed the nicked artery. "It's clean," he announced, moving back.

Fred cautiously gripped Dr. Halsey's arm again, rotating it slightly. The movement tore a couple of the cauterized veins, but it was a slow leak. He filled the wound with biofoam, to help it heal quickly, and pinched the skin gently shut. The stitches were old-fashioned but they worked.

The two Spartans were just finishing with her scalp, removing the debris and bandaging the wounds with butterfly stitches, when Dr. Halsey stirred and woke.

"Ma'am, don't move your head," Fred ordered as the doctor opened her eyes. They were out of focus and she didn't seem to hear him; she tried to turn towards the sound of his voice. Tom quickly sprang into action and gently held her head still for Fred.

"You have a few wounds, Dr. Halsey," Tom said softly. Fred straightened from crouching beside her, the bloody task finally done.

"Is everyone alright?" she asked immediately, clearly remembering everything in a rush.

"Chief Mendez got a little tossed around, but he seems to be recovering," Fred answered, bending over and gently undoing Dr. Halsey's safety harness. He picked her up, with Tom still holding her head, and moved outside.

The bright white light of the binary stars that served as this planet's suns assaulted his visor and it polarized to protect him. Dr. Halsey shut her eyes in protest; she probably had a wicked headache. Fred gently lay her on the grass next to Chief Mendez, who was patiently letting Lucy recheck for any signs of trauma.

Tom moved away to take Linda's spot on guard as the II came over to Dr. Halsey. "Doctor, are you alright?" she asked calmly, kneeling next to the older woman.

"Yes, Linda, I'm fine. Did we make it?"

"Indeed we did, Dr. Halsey." Keen Sacrifice hovered down a little closer. "Though from what I can see, you sustained injuries. I hope you will be well to move soon?"

"Why?" Fred asked, frowning.

"Big pack of carnivores, comin' our way," Kelly panted into the



radio, in answer. All the Spartans snapped towards her as she ran out of the sparse jungle-like forest surrounding them. "We gotta move. They're deadly."

"Are you injured?" Keen Sacrifice asked worriedly, hovering a little closer to Kelly, though not within arm's reach.

"No, they can't bite through our armor," she answered, holding up a forearm. Fred could make out the scratches from a wide " and powerful " set of jaws. "But they're fast, coordinated, and going to be here any minute."

"Alright." Fred stood and motioned for Linda to carry Halsey. "Lucy, take Mendez." He ignored the Chief's protests about his being perfectly capable of walking. "Tom, take point. Find us a cave " something defensible, near clean water if you can, but far from here. They're going to be attracted to all the blood in the Pelican."

"We'll need the Pelican's radio to send an SOS," Dr. Halsey murmured softly as Linda lifted her gently, wary of injuring her neck.

"I'll get it," Kelly said immediately. "Go." Fred frowned slightly; he didn't like leaving Kelly behind without a guard. But arguing would waste time. He nodded to the team around him and they moved off swiftly.

Kelly darted into the Pelican, avoiding the blood carefully " after all, the carnivores might track the smell " and pulling herself into the dirt-filled cockpit. She quickly found the radio and took the time to gently disentangle it " and its separate power system " from the dashboard. The silence of the jungle descended on her almost like a wave; the predators were coming.

The Spartan II folded the radio under her arm and left her rifle, choosing instead to fill her second arm with a crate of food supplies. Who knew when they could get back her to salvage the wreck?

Kelly leapt from the Pelican just as the pack of carnivores burst from the jungle's cover. She didn't wait for them to attack and took off running, remembering how fast the leader of the pack " the largest and meanest, apparently " had jumped her while she had been scouting. However, she didn't follow her teams' tags in case they caught their scent; she headed off in a perpendicular direction to their flight trail, hoping to lure the predators away.

With the promise of fresh prey, the creatures ignored the Pelican and came after Kelly. Dodging trees and bushes, leaping over twisting trunks and through patches of vines slowed her enough that she could hear the dog-like beasts keeping pace, just in her blind spots to her right and left. They ran on four legs, their forequarters not nearly so powerful as their hind so they ran in a leaping motion. She heard one yelp " probably got stuck by something, or picked off by another animal out here.

That still left three. When she had stumbled across them, only the largest had attacked, but now they were using the same techniques as wolves did to bring down moose in ancient history. She remembered the videos of the incident, recreated long after the last uncloned wolf

had died in a zoo on Earth. These creatures weren't driving her like the wolves were; they were waiting for her to tire, to stumble.

And after a hellish Pelican ride, Kelly wasn't at her best. She dove through a thicket of brambles that scraped across her armor and fell a few feet, landing on her knees in a thick stream. Without thinking, she was up and splashing her way upstream â€” the opposite bank was too steep to climb with both arms occupied.

The creatures splashed behind her and Kelly risked a glance over her shoulder. They were panting with breath, much as she was, their double-hinged jaws gaping open almost like an Elite's split chin. They had patchy mottled fur, matching the greens and browns of the jungle around them, with short puffed-up tails.

She straightened out and ran faster, unworried about tripping over the stream's liberally-strewn rocks.

"Kelly, you okay? Your vitals are elevated." Fred's voice was concerned over the radio.

"Yes, sir, just playing rabbit," Kelly answered shortly. "I have the radio and a case of food. These things are fast â€” just as fast as we are. They hunt in packs. There's three behind me â€” there was a fourth, he seems to have dropped out."

Ahead, Kelly saw another of the creatures jump out of the jungle and into the stream. "Scratch that, these things are smart. They're surrounding me."

Kelly leapt up the bank and scrambled back into the bushes. Obviously these creatures were smart; they were using the same practices as the Spartans used on teams of Grunts.

"I'm going to need some backup," Kelly barked into the radio. "I can lead them off but I need to protect this radio."

"I gotcha," Fred answered. "We've found a defensible cave. Dr. Halsey and Chief Mendez will stay here with Tom and Lucy. Linda and I will come find you and kill this pack. If this is their territory, we'll have to do it sooner or later."

"Alright, I'll lead them towards your trail," Kelly answered, turning slightly to the left. Behind her, the creatures were huffing loudly, snarling back and forth as though communicating.

Fred and Linda fell on the pack from the outside, letting Kelly run through their ambush and then attacking the two flanking creatures. They yelped in pain and astonishment as Fred sunk his knife into the eye-socket of his target and Linda broke the other one's back with a hard jab from her rifle.

The other two creatures spun and leaped; Linda dodged the one coming from her but Fred wasn't as quick, and it took the pair to the ground. The beast was larger than a wolf and more thickly built and easily knocked the Spartan over. Fred rolled with the blow and came up again, thrusting his knife out as the beast leapt again.

He scored a thin line down the thing's flank as he dodged the vicious fangs that could have engulfed his head in their jaws. The pair faced

off, Fred crouched with his knife before him and the creature on his powerful hind haunches, snarling.

Linda threw the creature from her back as it tried to bite through her armor's neckpiece, pinning it under her rifle and stomping on its neck. It went silent with a yelp as she felt the powerful boot destroy its vertebrae and skull. She picked her boot from the remains of its brain, shaking the blue blood from her boot, and looked to Fred.

He was peeling the last beast's jaws from his forearm, where it had been locked when he stabbed the thing through the brain.

"Thanks," Kelly said as she came back. "That should be all of them."

"How's the radio?" Linda asked quietly, slipping her gun back onto the magnetic strip on her back.

"Fine. Not even a dent." Linda took the crate of food supplies and headed towards the pair of blips in their HUDs that indicated where the Chief and the Spartans IIIs were. Fred sheathed his knife and followed them.

Dr. Halsey was sitting up and inspecting her head with gentle touches when the threesome arrived. Tom was posted at the beginning of the thin ravine that led to the cave. It was tight " Kelly felt her armor slide past quite a few jutting rocks as they passed through. The cave mouth was slightly wider than Fred's shoulders. It opened almost immediately into a tall-ceilinged cavern with natural formations along the walls and floor.

Chief Mendez was lying down on the floor slightly to Dr. Halsey's right. Lucy gently rolled his neck and then released him " he stood immediately and went to join Tom on guard duty. Keen Sacrifice was hovering around the stalactites at the top of the cave, well out of Kelly's reach.

"Kelly, I'll take the radio," Dr. Halsey said briskly, standing up and reaching for the equipment. Kelly gave it to her and explored the cave. The back wall was damp with moisture that ran down it in thin sheets.

"I'll set up a water system on the wall," she said, taking the crate of supplies from Linda. Hopefully it would contain the purification unit they had brought along, scavenged and repaired from the junk pile by Tom while they had been repairing the Pelican.

"We need to get those supplies before more animals show up to tear into them," Fred ordered. "Kelly, stay here and guard the doctor. The rest of us will hump gear back."

Kelly huffed into her comm, her near-silent protest evident. Fred just shook his head and motioned for Lucy and Linda to follow him out; they joined the Chief and Tom at the head of the ravine and Kelly watched her HUD as they moved out. The jungle around them was alive with movement, making her motion tracker spot red all along the periphery of her range.

"Kelly, can you flatten this stalagmite for me," Dr. Halsey called as

the Spartan opened the crate carefully. The younger woman stood and moved over to the thick pillar of stone the doctor was standing nearby; she was clearly looking to create a level plane to work with the radio. Kelly gripped the upper half of the cone and snapped it easily.

"Thank you," the older woman said quietly, setting the radio down. She attached the power cell " they'd need to move it outside for solar power soon " and engaged the radio.

Kelly watched silently, hands assembling the purification system easily, as the doctor dictated an SOS message into the radio and set it to repeat every thirty seconds. She replayed it once.

"\_SOS. This is Dr. Catherine E. Halsey, with several Spartans and Senior Chief Petty Officer Franklin Mendez, requesting immediate evac. We are stranded on Alpha Centauri's third planet, designation C 847 h. Prioritization code: Victor Zero Five dash Three dash Sierra One Zero Four. Spartan survivors present."\_

The message was about ten seconds long. Dr. Halsey seemed pleased with it and set it to looping. Kelly set the water system to purifying their water for the day and then explored the contents of the crate.

She organized the piles by days; if they supplemented the food with edible plants and animals from the jungle " if there were any " they could last for three weeks, counted by Earth's days, before this crate emptied.

"Doctor, is there any way to test local flora and/or fauna for edibility?" Kelly asked as she repacked the supplies.

"You mean besides trying it ourselves?" Dr. Halsey murmured, smiling briefly. Kelly nodded. "Yes. I managed to repair several instruments that will assist in our living here." She went to the entrance of the cave and peered out at the blue-green sky above them. "I will not lie, Kelly. It may be years before they find us."

"Our armor keeps us safe from the indigenous predators, but you aren't," Kelly said softly. "Even the IIIs are vulnerable."

Dr. Halsey nodded. "We will hope that something picks up our signal soon. And we'll set up the repulser as soon as the rest return."

Kelly frowned slightly behind her helmet. She still wasn't happy about being left behind on guard duty.

The doctor, of course, knew her Spartans better than they did themselves, and turned to smile briefly at the younger woman. "Let us knock down these spikes," she suggested, pointing to the ceiling. "We don't want them falling on us in our sleep."

Dr. Halsey moved back to the water station as Kelly obligingly snapped the points off all of the stalactites she could reach, even jumping for a few of them. She piles the tips in a neat stack near the entrance " they could be tied onto sticks and make effective spears for one-use defense.

By the time she had leveled all the stalagmites as well, the supply party was back with everything they could scavenge from the Pelican, including several sheets of steel with which they had made a crude sled.

"She won't be flying again," Fred said as he dragged the sled into the back of the cave. "Her belly's all torn out, not to mention she's completely empty."

Dr. Halsey nodded. "We knew we wouldn't be running sorties," she reminded him. "It was a miracle we got down to the ground safely." Fred rose an eyebrow, taking off his helmet. Linda remained outside on guard duty.

"That and your flying skills," she amended with a grin.

"Thank you, ma'am. How is your arm?" Fred asked, slightly concerned.

"It'll heal quickly," she said dismissively. "Are the supplies in good order?"

"There were a few scavengers picking around the site, but they hadn't gone inside yet," Fred answered.

"The radio is transmitting an SOS signal now, on loop every thirty seconds. Hopefully someone will pick it up. We're in the Alpha Centuari system â€" the second star is Beta Centuari. We're about 500 light years from Earth."

"Isn't there a colony on Beta Centuari?" Fred asked, frowning.

"There hasn't been any contact with the colonists since the war began. The planet was confirmed glassed in 2534, though it had happened long before. There was talk of recolonizing it, but with the war going so badlyâ€" Dr. Halsey shrugged slightly.

"We're about as far from Earth as we can get," Chief Mendez put in. "Centauri's colony was known for its champagne, because they shipped it to other colonies without Slipspace, letting the bottles age along the way."

"Clever," Dr. Halsey murmured.

"Can we pick up any comm traffic?" Fred asked.

Dr. Halsey shook her head. "The radio's too low on power to boost its signal. Pelican radios are designed to get and transmit signals no more than a few AU away. Someone will have to come to the system â€" or send a booster here â€" to pick it up."

"Alright, then, we'd better prepare for a long haul." Fred's hand twitched; Kelly noticed the motion and knew the Lieutenant wanted to be fidgeting with his knife. He suppressed the urge and turned to the crates of supplies. "Let's unpack and organize."

The Spartans each took a crate and started organizing the supplies. They condensed the food into three crates; Kelly used a hard rock from the floor of the cave â€" clearly not native to the limestone

surrounding them " to dig a hole in the cave wall, in which they stashed the medical supplies wrapped in plastic sheets to preserve them from damp and mildew. Dr. Halsey took the half-dozen pieces of equipment from the box. She had insisted they bring several tools with them, including a small speaker that she set to a pitch above human hearing to discourage predators coming to snoop.

All five Spartans could sense the sound, however, and it made them quickly nervous and upset, she could tell. Their movements lost their grace and instead moved jerkily; when she tapped her boot "accidentally" against a stalagmite, they all whirled at the sound.

She turned the pitch up to its highest setting but the Spartans were still edgy, so she resigned herself and shut the device off with a quiet sigh. She disliked the thought of keeping a guard. She'd rather her Spartans " and the IIIs " take the time to relax and really rest. They had been working themselves hard over the past weeks repairing the Pelican.

However, the small device that would detail a plant or animal's genetic structure from a sample of leaf or hair was still intact. She would use it to find out what animals and plants were safe to eat from around the cave.

She had also brought a spare power cell for the radio, which Tom took to lodge in the rock above the cave so it could transmit more clearly and take energy from the suns' rays.

Fred and Kelly headed out immediately to hunt " and probably run off some nervous energy. Tom joined Lucy on guard, and Chief Mendez pattered around the cave for a few moments before joining the pair of IIIs. Linda returned when the three soldiers had relieved her and immediately took a drink of water from the back of the cave.

"All quiet out there, doctor," she said quietly to Dr. Halsey, taking off her helmet.

The doctor smiled slightly and leaned against a stalagmite, looking at Linda. The Spartan's green eyes and red hair " which had earned her the nickname "Xmas" in training long ago " were slightly dulled from lack of sleep. Her short hair was matted with sweat and it clung to the sides of her face.

"We'll need to set up a bathing system," Dr. Halsey murmured softly. Linda glanced up at her and nodded, running her gloved hand through her hair and shaking it.

"There isn't enough water coming from the wall to make a shower worth the work," she mused softly. Unspoken was her reluctance to remove her armor and leave the cave.

"Perhaps there is a spring feeding the wall," Dr. Halsey murmured. She wished, briefly, for the scanners and detectors geologists used on potential well sites.

Linda shook her head. "It's trickling down from above us. There might be a pool up there; I don't hear a spring." Dr. Halsey nodded as the younger woman stood. "I'll go look," she said unnecessarily, striding from the cave.

Dr. Halsey opened her laptop â€" which, by some miracle, hadn't been broken in the crash â€" and started her notes.

\_Day 1 â€" We have found a cave in which to live. The back wall provides fresh water; Linda says it comes from a pool above, and has gone to investigate it. We will need a place to bathe â€" already I feel dirty after the showers from the Dyson Sphere.\_

Dr. Halsey glanced at the silent ancilla still hovering at the ceiling, apparently content to silently watch the humans' preparations.

\_Keen Sacrifice has been unusually quiet. We encountered our first indigenous animals and were forced to flee the wreckage of the Pelican, though Kelly managed to secure the radio before being chased by the pack of animals. They were large and powerful enough that she called for backup â€" Fred and Linda managed to kill the pack but I notice the new dents in Fred's forearm armor. The jaws of those predators were clearly capable of taking down much larger prey, which means there may be giant creatures around which may or may not be carnivorous. The Spartans, except Kelly, and Chief Mendez returned to the wreckage to salvage it. \_

\_I sustained minor injuries in the crash, to the head and arm. Chief Mendez has a concussion but will not rest despite my repeated warnings. He is a stubborn man. \_

\_Kelly and Fred have gone hunting, to bring back samples of local flora and fauna for me to test. If there is edible food, we will leave the rations and MREs for hard times. There is almost no information on this planet; I do not know if it has seasons, or how long they last. \_

\_The radio is transmitting our SOS signal, but it is unlikely to be heard within a reasonable period of time. Beta Centuari's colony was glassed long ago. By my calculations, it has been nearly ninety days since first entering the Shield World, meaning it is early February of 2553. It is entirely possible that humanity has ended within the past three months. \_

#### 4. Getting Ready for the Long Haul

##### **\*\*Chapter 3: Getting Ready for the Long Haul\*\***

\_Day 5 â€" Our perimeter is secure. Kelly has set up the trip wires and traps along a game trail. Keen Sacrifice remains fairly quiet. Perhaps he is conserving energy. I have asked him to boost our radio's signal to get closer to Earth â€" if any humans are left, it will be there â€" but he refuses. I do not know why. \_

\_The reports I have attached are those of indigenous plants and animals. We have found several that are safe to eat â€" but many more that are not, even lethally dangerous. \_

\_We have emptied the pool above this cave of animals and it now serves as our bathing pool. I am not allowed to leave the cave without an escort, but judging by the animals around, I am grateful. The pool is clean and chilly. Kelly usually escorts me â€" I don't

think she likes letting me leave the cave. \_

\_The Pelican's remains are apparently home to a group of rodent-like creatures, approximately twelve centimeters long and five centimeters wide. Their tails are thin and hairless, much like the rats of Earth, but only two centimeters long. They have sharp front teeth that can chip bone at least, though Fred and Kelly didn't get attacked when they went back to the wreckage. They said they will clear the nest within the next week and salvage the pieces of the Pelican to use as a wall in front of the cave.\_

\_There isn't much to report aside from the attached files detailing the flora and fauna. I have named the planet "Solstice" due to the near-constant light from Alpha and Beta Centauri. The Spartans are segregated quite noticeably, though Linda seems to be a mediator between the groups. \_

\_Lucy and Tom accept Fred but I sense a mutual dislike for Kelly. Perhaps it was her comments when we first came to the Dyson Sphere about their twitchiness " which is making itself apparent again, now that we are stuck in this cave without much in the way of entertainment. They hunt or patrol constantly, but with only animals and boredom to contend with, the Spartans are all nervous. \_

\_They aren't used to having nothing to do " with the war as it was going towards the end of 2552, they were more used to days in cryo-sleep and being tossed onto a battlefield as soon as they were moderately unfrosted. \_

\_I overheard Kelly whistling a tune I haven't heard for years, while I was taking my morning bath. They don't think I know the sound; children pretend their secrets are unknowable to adults. But the six-note tune means "all clear" to any Spartan II. I wish I had thought to include it on the radio's message, but it wasn't appropriate. Perhaps when someone comes to find us" \_

\_As the days pass, I become more and more convinced that humanity has been wiped from existence, and that any day we will see the giant purple bulk of a Covenant battle cruiser in orbit, tracing our SOS call. \_

\_I wonder what has happened to John. As far as I know " and Chief Mendez hinted that there might be a few Spartans left, though there are certainly none of the II generation still known to be alive when we escaped to the Dyson Sphere " he is, or was, the last of my IIs out fighting. He wouldn't ever give up, which means that either humanity still exists or John is dead. I cannot decide which I would rather be the truth. I can recall his fascination with quarters like it was yesterday; so far as I know, he still carries the quarter I gave him when I found him on that playground all those years ago.

\_

\_Looking at my Spartans, I can tell they are aging. We all are. My bones ache in ways that they wouldn't if we were in a temperature-controlled building. Chief Mendez is slow to get moving in the mornings, though it takes a keen eye to notice. The IIIs are, of course, just as tightly wound as any Spartan; they are often first out of the cave in the mornings, except for whoever is on guard duty.

\_



\_If humanity has been destroyed, I can only wonder what kind of "army" we'd make. One mentally unstable Spartan III â€" Lucy is clearly suffering from a strange form of suppressed PTSD â€" and her brother, three older Spartan IIs who are still angry at me about kidnapping Kelly, an old woman, and an even older Chief who should have retired from active duty years ago? Mendez may be steel and fire when it comes to his Spartan IIIs, but his body is betraying him in this damp, chilling weather. Perhaps we came as the planet was transitioning into winter.\_

\_Kelly is still angry at me for taking her as well. We have not spoken about the incident, though her wounds were healed while in the Dyson Sphere. I wonder if others see my actions as a betrayal, or if they understand my motives. My decision to begin the Spartan II program slowed the Covenant, but we cannot be sure if it saved it until our SOS is answered. \_

Kelly glanced over as Dr. Halsey sighed and closed her laptop. Every evening, she took notes â€" some days were more worthy of them than others. Their fifth day on the planet had started much like their fourth, and their third. Keen Sacrifice was sitting on the ground at Dr. Halsey's feet like a dog, as was his usual.

Fred had checked the radio this morning on his way to the bathing pool. They didn't strip fully â€" the animals around were too dangerous for that â€" but they made sure to wash their face and hands every day. The armor recycled their wastes as well.

Then Kelly and Fred had headed out for some hunting while Linda remained at the cave and wove a doorway out of vines. They needed it both to keep out the heat for this summery season and keep it in when â€" and if â€" this planet had a winter system. Chief Mendez had helped Linda while Tom and Lucy stayed on guard. They had to deal with the occasional curious animal, but the pair worked well together and seemed to enjoy the quiet hours of guarding.

Now they were all back in the cave, sitting as far as possible from the fire over which their dinner was roasting on a spit. Kelly scraped mud from her armor with a stick, digging it from between the cracks. The broom she had made would take care of the pile slowly building beneath her feet once she and her brother and sister were done.

Tom crouched on his heels next to the spit, turning it so the rat-sized creature would sear evenly. He was the best at it, though they still had to be careful of the tiny bones in the meat.

Dr. Halsey cleared her throat into the silence. Everyone looked over at her. "Now that we've been here a few days, we know what we're going to be up against as we wait for someone to visit this planet. Keen Sacrifice and I chose it because it is far from Earth - which means we'll probably have a long wait. It's also the one we stood the best chance to survive on."

Fred raised an eyebrow. "Then I'd hate to see the other candidates," he chuckled sourly, rotating his shoulder in a casual shrug.

Dr. Halsey smiled slightly. "In the interest of harmony and our wellbeing, it's time we got to know each other." She looked pointedly at Kelly, whose gaze didn't flicker from scraping mud from her boots.

"We will have to survive together," the doctor continued. "One of the best ways to bond is through shared experiences, and we will be sharing this one, quite possibly for a long time."

"We're nothing alike," Kelly argued, frowning apparently at a chunk of mud in her boot.

"You are more alike than you think," Dr. Halsey murmured. "Kelly, you were taken when you were six years old to complete the Spartan II training. As were you, Linda, Fred. You never knew your real families for long, and we ensured that your attention was focused 100% on your new brothers and sisters."

The IIIs listened in rapt attention.

"From what I have gathered from documents I borrowed and Chief Mendez, the IIIs went through a similar experience. We have been moving quickly to arrive here and send out our signal but we are now finding ourselves with hours on our hands of free time. Hours that we should spend working towards a more cohesive unit."

Dr. Halsey turned to Tom. "Perhaps you would like to start, Tom," she suggested.

"It's classified," he protested.

The IIs chuckled darkly and Fred leaned forward slightly. "Who are we going to tell?" he asked. "Those wolves? Besides, we were classified before you were born." He leaned back again.

Dr. Halsey shot a warning glare at Fred, who was back to scraping mud from his armor with a single-minded intensity. "Please tell us something you remember, Tom. About training, or your missions, or yourself. We will each share something this evening to ease us into the idea."

"Is this some sort of psych eval?" Kelly asked before Tom could answer. "'Cause I don't think we need an intervention, Dr. Halsey."

Dr. Halsey faced the indignant Spartan. "If you five are going to work together as seamlessly as we might need you to, you will need to know each other just as well as you knew John and James and Sam and all your Spartan II brothers and sisters. Honestly, the chance that humanity still exists is low. \_If\_ there are still humans out there, they certainly aren't going to take a trip to this planet without a good reason, and since it is hostile, there isn't one. So, please, Tom." She turned expectantly back to the III as he silently checked the meat.

"Very well, Dr. Halsey," he said after a glance to the Chief to ensure it was okay. "Well, as your FOF says, I'm Tom-B292. "B" means Beta â€" Lucy and I were both from the second company in the Spartan III program. I was on Team Foxtrot with Lucy, Adam, and Min." His eyes shadowed slightly and he turned back to the fire, almost as if he were speaking to it. "I signed on at six," he said.

That certainly made the three older Spartans glance between each other. Not "conscripted" like they had been?

He caught the movement and shrugged. "I was orphaned when my planet was glassed, so I joined up when they came looking for bodies," he explained. "I wanted to get revenge on those Covvie bastards." There was a spark of anger in his voice as it tightened; he got it back under control quickly. "We all trained for six years. I know, not as long as you did." He smiled wanly at the Spartan IIs. "Our augmentations weren't as extensive. We were suicide soldiers, designed to be replaceable. Command wanted a hundred thousand of us within twenty years, so Lieutenant Kurtâ€¦ trained us."

Kelly nodded. "We lost him in 2531," she said softly. "We thought he died, but I guess you all got him instead."

Lucy nodded, smiling slightly. Tom glanced at her and interpreted for the others in the room. "Lucy's right. He did a lot of good. He was a great commander. We learned a lot from him."

"Once we were twelve, we got our mission." Kelly raised an eyebrow slightly; she and her fellow Spartan IIs hadn't been deployed before fourteen. "I told you, we weren't expected to survive. Why wait?" His voice held no trace of bitterness, though he clearly mourned his teammates. "There were 300 of us in Beta, understand. We were sent to Pegasi Delta, to a Covenant refinery. Unfortunately, our intel was bad â€" there were a lot more Covenant than expected. They wiped us out; only Foxtrot made it into the refinery."

Despite herself, Kelly felt invested in the story, leaning forward slightly. Tom, however, shrugged. "We blew it up," he said shortly. "Managed to take out quite a few ships as well â€" they had been mistaken for part of the complex by our spy drones. Lucy and I made it out. I don't remember how; I just remember waking up back on Onyx and being told our mission was successful. We lost all but two Spartans â€" Lucy and I â€" and Gamma Company was coming up to be trained. So Lieutenant Kurt recruited me."

He didn't mention how Lucy had managed to be recruited; Dr. Halsey waited expectantly then gently probed, "And Lucy?"

Tom glanced at the young woman with a slightly sorrowful smile. "The L.T. wanted Lucy, too. Saved her from a medical discharge."

"Because you do not speak, I assume," Dr. Halsey said directly to Lucy. "Why is that?"

Lucy shrugged, opening her hands in the classic "I don't know" gesture. Tom smiled slightly. "She just doesn't," he answered Dr. Halsey.

"Is it a matter of "won't" or "can't," Lucy?" the doctor asked, leaning forward earnestly.

Kelly, Fred, and Linda exchanged glances. They were used to the woman's forward manner, but Lucy probably wasn't, and the last thing they needed was for Lucy to attack if she felt threatened.

Lucy shrugged again, conveying that she didn't know â€" or wouldn't tell â€" which.

Dr. Halsey's lips thinned slightly as she crossed her ankles. "Surely you know which it is, Lucy," she continued.

"Lay off," Chief Mendez said curtly, sitting up from where he was lying on the floor. "Lucy doesn't speak. End of story."

"And if you get in trouble, how will you call for help?" the older woman asked, pushing her glasses further up her nose. They were cracked widely but she kept them on anyway.

"We're Spartans," Tom said quietly.

"That doesn't make you immune to the creatures around here," Dr. Halsey pointed out ruthlessly.

"We can handle ourselves," Kelly answered. "We've been going out daily and no one has been injured."

"Yet," Dr. Halsey said pessimistically. "But," she said, holding up a hand as Kelly drew a breath to speak again, "you're right. Partially, at least. Don't let your guard down."

Kelly glanced at Fred, who was smiled bemusedly. Dr. Halsey was worried about them. It made the Spartans uncomfortable; they had spent years as living weapons, robots to most.

"Dinner's ready," Tom said quietly from his position near the fire. He passed out plates with piece of the meat, which they supplemented with mouthfuls of the slightly sour tubers Kelly had dug up and washed.

The meat was sweet, to balance the sourness of the tubers. Instead of tasting gamy, it reminded Kelly of chicken. Very greasy chicken, but still chicken. They ate quickly, the Spartans finishing long before Dr. Halsey, who took the time to tear her portion of meat into several finger-length pieces for neatness.

"Alright, Lucy and I shared," Tom said once they were finished. Linda gathered up the plates they had made from smooth sections of bark and stacked them to be washed. "Your turn." He smirked slightly at Kelly, who scowled.

"No," she growled.

Dr. Halsey shook her head in mute reproach. "Kelly, go on. Tom and Lucy shared. Now it's your turn."

"This is stupid," Kelly muttered. Dr. Halsey just gave her a look. "Alright, alright, fine," she grumbled. "We got conscripted at six," she said, frowning. "There were almost a hundred of us. Half didn't make it through augmentations." She paused, shaking her head slightly. Some of her good friends had been killed or disfigured during the process. "There," she grunted. "I shared."

"We'll let it serve for now, but you'll have to do better next time," Dr. Halsey said, turning to Linda.

Linda shrugged quietly. "We started out with the Insurrectionists, attacking high-profile targets and taking out leaders of the movement. You probably weren't born yet." She glanced at the younger Spartans; it was hard to tell a Spartan's age. "They haven't been an issue for many years; most came back to the UNSC once the Covenant

started in on us. There are probably a few colonies left, somewhere out there, hiding in backwater asteroids."

"Asteroids â€" they were always completely infatuated with asteroids. They'd spin them to make the gravity to hold everyone down," Fred added, with a slight grin.

"It was a good idea," Linda said quietly. "Hard to track. There are thousands in a good-sized belt, and hundreds that could be large enough for a base. They're in a stable-enough orbit."

"I wonder how many are still out there," Fred said with a slight frown. "If the Covenant found Earth, could there still be Insurrectionists around?"

"I doubt it," Kelly said. "The Covenant are good at finding our planets. Who says they can't find those asteroids? They can certainly track our communications. We can track our own weapons â€" I'm sure they can do the same."

"Not necessarily," Dr. Halsey said. "From everything we've seen of the Covenant, they have better technology â€" for now â€" but they don't improve on it. They aren't used to technology as "primitive" as ours."

"And they think we're less than the dirt beneath his shoes," Kelly said. "They might not bother tracking our weapons 'cause they're not all that deadly, at least ship-to-ship."

"You don't track the ants you squish," Chief Mendez said.

"We're not ants," Tom protested.

"They think we are," Linda said calmly. "You haven't been on many planets, I imagine, going straight from training to combat and back to being a trainer." Tom nodded in agreement. "Elites might kind of respect us Spartans, but the Marines and Helljumpersâ€" Linda shook her head. "Our helmets had translation software, an upgrade so we can hopefully gather more intelligence. Most of what they yell is religious, talking about their Forerunner gods and whatnot, but sometimes we get something helpful. Orders, mostly. Then we can intercept squads, take 'em out before they get to the Marines."

"You make Marines sound useless," Dr. Halsey observed blandly.

"Against Elites?" Kelly snorted. "They can handle Grunts, maybe some Jackals. If they outnumber an Elite by at least half a dozen, they might get lucky."

"Marines are your fellow soldiers," the doctor said quietly.

"They're liabilities in the field," Kelly argued. "They land, take a few squads, and call for evac." Fred and Linda weren't the only ones hearing the disgust in Kelly's tone.

"They help evacuate survivors," Dr. Halsey pointed out.

"They're excellent nursemaids." Linda sighed quietly, shaking her

head at Kelly's tone. "What?" Kelly demanded. "It's true. If we had a dozen Spartans on every planet, we wouldn't have lost any of them. But, no. We get Marines. Maybe Helljumpers â€" and you know what they're like."

"Kelly, not everyone can be a Spartan," Dr. Halsey said softly. "Your augmentations alone would kill 97% of the general population. With the new augmentations the IIIs underwent, perhaps 8% would survive the process and training. The emotional and social conditioning would render another 1% unfit for duty."

"2% of humanity's more than worth it," Kelly argued, leaning back against the stone wall behind her.

Dr. Halsey shook her head. "We should be trying to save every life we can, Kelly."

Kelly shook her head. "Why? The strong live; that's the lesson the Covenant have been pounding into us since day one of this war. We need to be stronger to survive."

"Humanity is incredibly resilient," Dr. Halsey reminded her.

"Humanity was being wiped out last time I checked," Kelly said ruthlessly, refusing to meet anyone's eyes. "We're slowing it down, but it's still happening. We lost Reach. We lost Onyx. How long before they find Earth?"

"Our best protections are on Earth. The Orbital Defense-

"It won't matter," Kelly argued. "They'll bring everything they have. We outnumber them six to one in ships and they still manage to gut us nine times out of ten."

"I've never known you to be so negative," Dr. Halsey said softly.

"It's the truth," Kelly snorted. "I'm going for a walk." She stood and left quickly, slamming her helmet on as she ducked through the layer of vines partially covering the doorway.

Fred and Linda exchanged glances and were half-way out of their seats when Dr. Halsey recalled them. "Let her have a moment," she said. "She's struggling."

"We all are," Fred said softly, his glance including Tom and Lucy.

"You aren't used to enforced boredom," Dr. Halsey reminded them gently. "It will get worse before it gets better."

Fred's fingers spun in a complicated maneuver with his knife, the only sign of his agitation to anyone but Dr. Halsey. "Doctorâ€| What's the chance that humanity even still exists?"

Even Chief Mendez sat up to watch Dr. Halsey earnestly as she frowned slightly. She finally sighed, shaking her head. "Very low, I'm afraid. My last intelligence is almost a year old. I cannot make an accurate prediction, but the chance that Earth has been discovered is

high."

"And we're stuck here, without anything useful to do," Linda said quietly, cracking her knuckles.

"The most useful thing we can do is stay alive," Dr. Halsey said firmly. "If anyone is out there, they will find us."

"Not before I've gone grey," Fred said with a sad chuckle.

"We have to hope," Dr. Halsey said firmly.

Linda looked to Chief Mendez, smiling slightly. "You always taught us that hope is like a candle, sir." Mendez grunted in agreement. "Too much and it'll burn itself out. Too little, and it'll die." She looked back to Dr. Halsey. "What use is hope? We can plan for everything, every contingency."

"John always said to plan for the worst but hope for the best," Fred mused. "I think the best we can hope for is someone finding us before Lucy and Tom go grey." That elicited small grins from the two young Spartans.

"You know if John is alive, he's looking for you," Dr. Halsey said.

"\_If\_ he's alive, \_if\_ he isn't busy trying to save more planets, and \_if\_ he thinks we're still alive," Fred pointed out. "Onyx was glassed. He assumes we're dead."

"He'd never give up on us," Linda argued.

"We've lost our brothers and sisters, Linda," Fred responded. "For all anyone knows, we're just more KIAs." He gestured to everyone in the room.

"MIAs," Dr. Halsey responded. "Spartans aren't listed as KIA, for morale."

Fred nodded. "Still, John knows who's actually confirmed dead and who's just never been recovered."

"You thought Lieutenant Ambrose was KIA and he had been alive all along," Chief Mendez reminded him.

"I still can't wrap my head around that," Fred admitted with a slight grin, though his eyes were shadowed with sadness. "How did they manage it? A busted jet pack is hard to fake."

Chief Mendez shrugged. "They didn't tell me how. He just showed up at the training grounds." He smiled slightly. "He was a good trainer. I thought you all were a handful â€" he dealt with triple the number, three times."

Linda showed more of her teeth than necessary in a grin, looking at Tom and Lucy. "Did you carry on the Spartan tradition of frustrating the trainers?"

"All in the name of training," Tom assured her with a grin.

"Good man." Fred grinned, clapping Tom on the shoulder gently.

"You all gave me grey hair before my time," Chief Mendez chuckled. He seemed relaxed, though he quickly coughed to cover the rest of his chortle.

They were silent for a while, each lost in their own thoughts. Fred idly flipped his knife back and forth.

"You know what we need?" Linda said suddenly. Everyone looked at her quizzically. "Something to do. A game, \_something\_."

"For now, let's go find Kelly," Fred suggested. Dr. Halsey nodded in agreement "and," Fred noted, like she was giving him permission.

"May we come?" Tom asked as Linda and Fred stood. The older Spartans blinked in surprise.

"If you want," Fred said, shrugging. He noted the gleam of triumph in Dr. Halsey's eyes as the younger Spartans followed the older ones out of the cave.

"They're good kids," Chief Mendez grunted once they were out of earshot. "But they're different from the IIs. You're not gonna make them a seamless team."

"We'll see," Dr. Halsey murmured. "Spartans are Spartans, no matter what generation."

"They won't replace Kurt," Mendez said warningly. "They loved him."

"As did we all."

The older man grunted and brought out a small stick, using his knife to whittle it away. Dr. Halsey returned to her notes on the local flora and fauna. What she wouldn't give for a good lab.

\_~~Outside~~\_

Kelly swung her leg idly, staring up at the unfamiliar stars. The night around her was quiet, though she could hear a snake moving through the trees off to her left. It was a small one "probably only five feet long. She left her helmet on, though she wanted the cool breeze tossing the branches above her head to flow through her hair and carry her worries away with it.

Somewhere, out in those stars, waited the Covenant. That was a fact. Whether human ships still flew was a mystery; she was inclined to think not. She knew that the UNSC would have fought until there was no hope, until every soldier was dead, but the Covenant had been hitting harder and faster when Dr. Halsey had kidnapped her.

Kelly clenched a fist in anger. She had trusted the doctor as she trusted no one but a Spartan. \_A Spartan II\_, she reminded herself. Tom and Lucy, especially Lucy, managed to grate her nerves daily. They were obviously not trying to do it; in fact, they seemed very pleasant. Under different circumstances, they might have been



friends.

But they were still Spartan IIIs, a completely different class of warrior from Kelly and her siblings. They were kamikaze soldiers, trained to die in a spectacular show of force by the UNSC. It was a fluke that Tom and Lucy were alive, she knew.

\_But then, it's a fluke any of us are alive.\_ She remembered the fear â€" actual fear, not just caution â€" she had felt on Onyx, trapped against the Shield World's door and the thousands of Covenant soldiers.

\_We left Kurt to die.\_ It didn't matter that Kelly had followed orders. She had let a friend, her brother, die to protect her. Spartans didn't do that. They died to protect others.

Kelly let her head fall back onto the trunk's smooth bark behind her. She disliked hours of quiet. It reminded her of worlds just before they were glassed; the silence as every animal around felt something coming, the distant whine of Pelicans taking soldiers and civilians off the planet. Spartans were the last to dust off, always. The beams of energy that burned and slagged everything in their path were terrible to behold â€" yet the power they brought to the table just made Kelly jealous.

\_Just give me one ship,\_ she had always thought after losing a planet, angry at herself and the Covenant, \_just one ship, and I'll find your homeworlds and blow them up just like you do ours.\_

Now, Kelly desperately wanted that one ship. It wouldn't matter if it came from the UNSC or the Covenant. She just wanted off this planet, back in the fight.

Kelly tried to imagine dying. She had been able to before â€" searing pain, maybe, before sinking slowly into darkness. Or the quick punch of a Needler round to the chest or head. But now, with silence for company, Kelly found that she couldn't.

She could still feel pain, she told herself. But the pain from being shot by plasma or stung by an energy sword was much different than the pain inside her. Out there in those stars, John could still be fighting, needing someone to cover his back. Or he could be a heap of fused metal on a glassed planet somewhere, his name lost to eternity.

\_All our names, lost to eternity. \_

That was one thing she had been jealous of Kurt for. He had a last name. Perhaps it hadn't been his real one, but it was still a family name.

Kelly slammed her fist into the branch supporting her, careful not to break it but trying to express her frustration. She had never liked hours to think to herself â€" that was why she, and every Spartan, went into cryo as soon as a ship left another glassed planet. These thoughts were always waiting. She didn't regret being a Spartan â€" no one could â€" but she wanted something more. The happy-go-lucky attitude of the Marines both sickened her and made her jealous. When was the last time she taken the time to joke with her family, her fellow Spartans? They had been spread too thin at the end, before Dr.

Halsey had taken Kelly.

"What good is being a Spartan when you can't do anything about the war?" the woman asked herself, easing her gloved hand from the dent it had made in the wood.

Kelly remembered each and every one of her fellow IIs who had failed the augmentations. Most had died, but some lived. She wondered where they were " and finally understood what they had been going through, these past thirty-odd years she had been fighting. Everything they, and now she, had trained for had come to pass, but they weren't able to be part of the fighting.

\_~~Nearby~~\_

Fred glanced at the locator tag on his HUD. Kelly still hadn't moved. She'd had enough time to herself, he decided, moving forward. Behind him and slightly to one side, Linda pushed a low-hanging vine out of her way as she followed. Tom and Lucy trailed the pair, keeping their eyes open for any night predators.

"Kelly," Fred called softly into the tree above him. He heard his sister shift and she dropped down, landing gracefully and bending her knees to take the impact.

"Come to bring me back, sir?" she asked, her voice completely toneless.

Fred nodded. "Let's go," he suggested. "We don't want to leave Dr. Halsey and the Chief alone for long."

Kelly glanced past him and spotted the two IIIs, who nodded in greeting. "It doesn't take all four of you to find me," she huffed, walking back towards the cave. Fred trotted to a position next to her, bumping her shoulder in both reprimand and comfort.

"We all needed some air," he said over a private comm to Kelly. "It's hard to talk about what has happened. To us, to them" | To humanity as a whole."

Kelly sighed in agreement. "I just don't see the need. You, me, and Linda are a good team. Lucy and Tom are different."

"They're still Spartans, our brother and sister."

"More like cousins."

"Family." Fred paused as they jumped a small stream. "And we owe it to Kurt to include them."

Kelly winced slightly. She hadn't thought of it that way. "They were family to him, which makes them family to us," Fred continued.

"I get it," Kelly snapped. "I'll try to be nice. No promises."

Fred smiled under his helmet. It would do for now.

\_To my reviewers: I know Centauri is only 5 LY from Earth, but in the Halo 'verse, Beta Centuari is 525 LY from Earth, so I stuck to that. I had forgotten the IIs came to Onyx via Earth, which is me not doing my research. I apologize. Also, keep in mind that this story is so AU it's not even funny anymore. I'm exercising a lot of freedom here. Please leave reviews! I enjoy reading them!\_

#### **\*\*Chapter 4: Tones of Boredom\*\***

Kelly carefully sat on a rock above the pond. They had found it a week ago; it was a half-day's hike from the cave, but the crystal-clear waters were inviting. It would hold a maximum of two Spartans at once, and was only chest-deep, but it would serve. Kelly had walked around its shore in less than two minutes, but it was the largest source of water within hiking distance for the doctor.

Linda, in front of her, was using the poison Dr. Halsey had cooked up from various plants they brought back daily to clear the pond. It took almost a gallon of the stuff to kill all the animals in the area; Fred was on the other side of the pond, treating it from there. Dr. Halsey and Chief Mendez were nearby, with Tom and Lucy acting as their guards.

Kelly held the bottle of reagent that would neutralize the poison within hours. This lake would now be their bathing pool; the one atop the cave wasn't optimal, since it was also their source for drinking water. And the Spartans needed to get out of their armor and scrub every inch. Kelly could feel the dry, flaky mass of dead skin worming its way through her joints down to her boots. All of them stank.

They watched as the fish " there were few species on this planet but they bred like rabbits " slowly floated to the surface, followed by the amphibious frog-like creatures bigger than a small cat. They would fence in the lake with pieces of the Pelican and vines that produced a toxic sap to prevent anything from migrating in, and place a screen over the stream that fed this pool.

Their materials were laid out nearby; Linda and Fred shook the bottles of poison they held and then rinsed them in the water. Fred tossed his like a pigskin across the lake; Kelly caught it and wedged it carefully into the rock next to her. Linda did the same with her bottle as Kelly stood.

Lucy and Tom joined Fred and Linda in maneuvering the heavy pieces of Pelican into place, digging them into the ground. The fence wasn't all that tall " Kelly could peer over it if she went up on the balls of her feet " but it would keep out most animals. Everything on this planet recognized the vines they would cover the steel with, also.

As the four worked, Dr. Halsey and Chief Mendez moved into the partially fenced-in area. The doctor took the bottle of reagent from Kelly as the Spartan went to clear all branches that could let some of the nimbler creatures jump over the fence. They came down easily, cracking under her weight when she hung onto them or, for the largest, succumbing quickly to Fred's knife.

Dr. Halsey added the reagent to the lake just as the brightness of the light around them intensified suddenly, marking what they called

"noon." The chemicals inside the bottle would render the water safe for them to bathe in. Despite the chilly temperature, when compared to the weather around them, Dr. Halsey found herself looking forward to it.

Around the pond, the fence was quickly taking shape. Lucy and Tom dug the trenches with shovels made from pieces of bark, the tips hardened over the fire yesterday. Fred and Linda followed with pieces of the Pelican, which they had scavenged this past week. Originally, they had thought to build a solid defense in front of the cave, but with this pond now being so vital to their health â€" they were all suffering from a lack of hygiene â€" they decided to use it here instead.

Even with only a few feet around the pond of shoreline for undressing, the pieces of the Pelican only barely managed to create a solid wall. Linda and Lucy carefully draped it in poisonous vines; when cut or bruised, they oozed a sticky sap that caused hallucinations and fatigue. They broke a few pieces prudently, smearing the smelly sap onto the wall to discourage other animals from investigating.

Then they tried the doorway â€" made from the intact back hatch of the Pelican â€" and came into the small ring of safety.

"I think we should test it out," Fred suggested, eyeing the wall for any chinks or loose sections. "The branches are all trimmed?" Kelly nodded.

"We could stand to cut down a few of the trees that are too close for my comfort," she added. "But with a guard, we should be okay."

Fred nodded. "I'll stand guard first," he offered. Dr. Halsey dipped a small instrument â€" sabotaged from the water purification system for just this â€" into the water and it beeped cheerily after a moment.

"The water's clean," she said, smiling.

"We should make this quick," Linda suggested, already peeling off her gloves. "It'll be time to head back soon. We don't want to be caught out in the dark." It would be no problem for the Spartans, but with Dr. Halsey and even Chief Mendez, they could easily run into trouble if they were attacked.

Dr. Halsey nodded and set her instrument next to the bottles on the flat rock nearby. She summarily undressed, folding her clothing neatly. "We'll have to find some way to clean our clothes," she said as she stepped into the water. The cold immediately hit her and she shivered, crossing her arms automatically. However, she was in the company of Spartans, who didn't know modesty rules and didn't care, and Chief Mendez had turned his back already. The doctor took a deep breath and sat down quickly.

The mud was soft and clean as Dr. Halsey quickly ducked her head and scrubbed at her scalp. She could feel the dead skin from her head falling off; it felt wonderful. Within seconds, she felt cleaner than she had since they left the Shield World.

As the doctor stood again, Kelly immediately stepped forward and

scooped her up before she could protest, setting her on the large flat rock to dry in the hot sun. They didn't have towels but Fred handed her a thermal blanket from the cave " which he had been storing in his thigh compartment, apparently " to cover herself with.

Chief Mendez went next, relieved to finally clean off all the grime that had accumulated after twenty-eight days on the planet, since he hadn't trusted the tiny pool above their cave for a full bath. Tom and Lucy were next to bathe, going in together and quickly coming back out. The pond was noticeably dirty after the pair finished.

Linda went in next as the two younger Spartans jogged in place to warm up, leaving their armor off until they were dry. Nothing chafed like wet skin under armor. Kelly was half-way undressed when Linda came back out, shivering and copying Tom and Lucy. By then, Dr. Halsey was dry and redressing, slicking her hair back with a refreshed look on her face.

Once everyone had had a turn, the pond was definitely mucky. However, Fred, who had gone last, didn't mind at all. It was a treat to be out of the MJOLNIR for a few minutes, letting all the dead skin cells that had been clamming to his skin fall off in the water.

"I really don't want to get back into that," Linda said, eyeballing her pile of armor where it was stacked.

"They could use a cleaning," Fred agreed, glancing at the suns above them. "But it's getting late. We'll come back tomorrow, when the pond's had a chance to clear." Everyone nodded agreement and put their armor back on, though the feeling of the sweat-soaked undersuits touching their newly-clean skin made all the Spartans long for proper cleaning equipment for the suits.

They closed up the fence tightly and headed back for the cave, a slight spring in everyone's step. Being clean felt wonderful. Kelly even enticed Fred and Linda into a game of tag as they neared the cave; Tom and Lucy remained behind to guard Dr. Halsey and Chief Mendez while the three Spartan IIs raced around the foursome, never wandering far. The doctor could occasionally make out the sound of a heavy impact " likely one of the older Spartans tackling another " or a laugh through their external speakers. It was good to see them loosen up, though she wished they would include Tom and Lucy in their games.

Just as she thought it, Linda burst from the bushes next to Tom, slapping him on the forehead and then jumping back as he automatically responded with what would have been a vicious back-handed slap.

"I'll take your spot," Kelly said, appearing on Dr. Halsey's right silently. The doctor knew better than to startle; the Spartan II had done it on purpose, and glanced at her with a small grin of approval. Tom glanced at Lucy, who grinned and shoved him towards where Linda had disappeared in silent but obvious approval.

Tom left them quickly, obviously trying to track Linda as he moved off, eyes scanning the ground. Kelly took up the point position, Dr. Halsey and Chief Mendez just behind her and Lucy bringing up the

rear.

They came upon the cave just as Fred darted into the group and tagged Lucy, who seemed startled to be included but managed to smack Linda on the hip as everyone but Kelly, Dr. Halsey, and Chief Mendez dashed into the cave in a wild tangle.

"I think I win," Fred said when the last three of their party came in to find him sitting on Linda, pinning her with his weight. It would have been easy for the woman to throw him off, but she just lay there, letting him win; Lucy and Tom were already setting up dinner, clearly hungry. They metabolized food faster than the IIs, a result of their different augmentations, and were obviously eager to roast their day's catch.

Kelly pushed Fred over, knocking him off Linda and helping her up with a grin in her movements. Fred, grumbling about being picked on, nevertheless seemed just as content. He took off his helmet.

"Remember the war games we used to play?" he asked as he sat down near the entrance to the cave, his back to the wall and watching it from one corner of his eye.

Kelly and Linda chuckled and nodded; Tom and Lucy grinned as well. Dr. Halsey set herself to observing quietly; Mendez sat in his customary spot, running a hand through his nearly-dried hair. Keen Sacrifice trilled a soft welcome to Dr. Halsey but saw that the doctor was occupied and settled next to her feet silently.

"We should play some," Kelly said, taking off her helmet with a grin. "Keep ourselves fit."

"Yeah, like we could be anything but," Fred snorted. It was true â€" the hours spent tracking down and taking prey kept all of the Spartans in fighting trim.

"I can practically feel my reflexes slowing," Linda said.

"Or you're just getting old," Kelly told her with an innocent smile.

Linda shrugged in amused agreement. Tom started the fire as he chimed in quietly. "Kelly's right," he said. "If someone comes for us â€" either human or Covenant â€" we'll need to be fast. If it's human, we'll probably be thrown right into the fight. If it's notâ€" They all nodded, mood temporarily mellowed by the mention of the Covenant.

"And they would provide an outlet for your energy," Dr. Halsey added when the Spartans were silent for a long moment. They nodded in agreement. Kelly fluffed a hand through her wet hair; it was longer than she usually kept it.

"Fred, how're your barber skills?" she asked with a chuckle.

"Not the best," the Spartan answered with an amused shrug. "But I'll give it a go." Kelly nodded and shifted so he could kneel behind her. His knife â€" still sharp even after the abuse it had endured for the past month â€" made easy work of her hair as he began by slicing off

the longest strands. "You know, I could shave you bald."

"No, thank you," Kelly told him sternly. "Just as close to a buzz as you can get."

Fred chuckled softly and carefully skimmed along her scalp. "There you go," he said when he was finished. Kelly ran a hand over it â€" it was uneven, but almost as short as she liked it.

"Thanks."

Linda asked Fred to do the same thing; Tom and Lucy shrugged and joined the hair train. "I feel like a barber now," Fred chuckled. He was getting better at making the slices even. Dr. Halsey decided to keep her slightly-longer-than-chin-length hair as it was; Chief Mendez was going bald anyway and declined trimming the remaining strands.

Fred was just finishing with Lucy â€" who was noticeably fidgeting with a knife so close to her head â€" when Tom announced that their dinner was ready. They sat down to eat and finished their meal quickly â€" except for Dr. Halsey, who still ate like a civilian. The Spartans lounged around the fire trading stories.

Dr. Halsey watched as her Spartans â€" she had come to think of the IIIs as hers as well â€" bonded, laughing and joking as they digested the food. Kelly nudged Tom when he started to get up to do the dishes, pulling him back into the group and telling him they would do it later. Outside, twilight deepened into true darkness. It was peaceful â€" the calls of animals were far from their cave, though the doctor knew someone would stand guard tonight, as always, and a gentle breeze fluttered the vines over the doorway.

\_Day 32 â€" I count these days by Earth's, though sunlight almost never ends here thanks to the double star system. We get perhaps three hours of darkness, and another two or three of twilight at the end and beginning of each new "day." We have adjusted to the schedule, however, oversleeping in the morning past when the suns clear the horizon.\_

\_Kelly is still sick from the laceration that got through her armor like a Needler. She is unsure what managed to penetrate her thick suit under the MJOLNIR. At least she is speaking again. The poison has had obvious detrimental effects on her mental state, which is why I was unable to make a note yesterday of the incident. She is resting quietly now.\_

\_Fred and Linda managed to remove her armor and allow me access to the site. The stinger someone penetrated her skin between two slits in her armor just above her right hip. The swelling is down â€" it only resembles a baseball now, instead of the good-sized melon it had been when we managed to release the armor and allow it to swell.

—

\_Chief Mendez is now watching over our invalid; Fred and Linda are trying to find the source of the attack. It is likely small, I told them â€" the stinger I extracted was the size of my pinky in length but only two or three millimeters thick. I have analyzed it â€" see attached report. \_

\_Tom and Lucy are on guard. They have not warmed to me the way my Spartan IIs did, but that is to be expected. I have starting thinking of all five Spartans as my responsibility. I will not let them be used so harshly againâ€¦ if we are ever found. Tom and Lucy seem to view Chief Mendez as some sort of uncle figure. An abusive uncle, if you ask me, but what was I if not an abusive mother figure to my IIs?\_

\_The "days" pass slowly here. I have analyzed every piece of plant and animal matter the Spartans bring to me. They will not let me leave the cave without an escort. After seeing the creatures they bring back, I agree â€" I am no match for the predators that my Spartans are bringing down daily. My profile of this planet's flora is slowly improving. If we are not found soon, I will manage to catalog everything within a half-day's sprint for the Spartans.\_

Kelly was sweating, though they had taken her armor off and applied cool cloths to her forehead. Chief Mendez leaned over her, a worried frown on his lips, and pressed his hand to her cheek, feeling the flushed and warm skin, surprisingly smooth for being so scarred.

Kelly's eyes cracked open, seeking around her for the touch. Mendez moved carefully into her line of vision.

"Chief?" she asked dazedly. Her voice was hoarse and cracking, and he quickly put a finger to her lips to stop her from speaking.

"Quiet, Kelly," he said gruffly. "You got stung by some sort of poisonous rat thing."

Kelly just nodded and closed her eyes again. Mendez dribbled water from a bottle into her mouth and she swallowed it eagerly.

"How is our patient?" Dr. Halsey asked, coming over to check on the wound just above Kelly's right hip. The swelling was going down noticeably now that the stinger was out, but they didn't have any ice to speed the process along. She moved aside the damp cloths that covered the area and frowned at what she found.

"Feverish," Chief Mendez answered. Dr. Halsey nodded and gently squeezed the large ball of swollen skin that marked the entry sight. It oozed yellow pus.

"I need to drain it," Dr. Halsey murmured. She stood and went to the medical kit; it had a scalpel and a small tray she could use to catch the mess to keep the cave clean.

Dr. Halsey stuck her head out of the cave's front entrance. "Tom, I need your assistance," she called. He appeared immediately, leaving Lucy alone on guard duty. The doctor led the Spartan into the cave. "You and Chief Mendez will have to hold her down if she feels this," she explained. "She's delirious and may think we are dangerous if I suddenly cut her open."

Tom nodded in understanding and positioned himself on Kelly's left; Chief Mendez, on her right, explained quietly to Kelly what they were going to do, but she didn't seem to hear it.



"Get ready," Dr. Halsey told them. Tom leaned forward and braced himself against Kelly's shoulder; Chief Mendez did the same on her other side.

Dr. Halsey glanced up to make sure they were ready and carefully made a short incision. The puss ran out immediately; Kelly didn't react beyond a soft gasp. The doctor gently pressed on the upper side of the wound with a sterile glove, forcing out the pus. The pocket of skin that had formed deflated as it emptied; the wound hardly bled. Once it was finished draining, Dr. Halsey cleaned it deftly and left it to heal, putting aside the catching tin of pus to be disposed of later.

Tom and Chief Mendez let Kelly go as Dr. Halsey moved around to the younger woman's head. "How do you feel, Kelly?" she asked softly.

"Fine," she answered briefly without opening her eyes.

"Any wooziness or headache?" Kelly shook her head a fraction. "Go back to sleep, then," Dr. Halsey ordered. Kelly complied quietly.

Tom took the container of pus with him as he went to rejoin Lucy on patrol, to bury it as they did with all their trash. Chief Mendez changed the cloths on Kelly's feverish brow and angry-looking wound, adjusting the blanket that preserved her non-existent modesty and tucking in the corners.

The two older adults occupied themselves with small tasks, checking constantly on Kelly as the day wore on. Fred and Linda returned just as twilight began darkening the entrance to the cave; Lucy and Tom followed them in, along with Keen Sacrifice. They had established their territory with most of the large predators nearby, or killed them, and they always ate as a group to plan their next day's chores and duties.

Keen Sacrifice hovered over Kelly, checking on her but remaining out of arm's reach, and then floated over to Dr. Halsey. He rarely spoke anymore, except to refuse when the doctor asked him to boost their signal to Earth. The ancilla mostly followed Lucy now.

Linda gave Tom a thick-walled pot she had carved from a green tree trunk with a crude knife made from a sharp rock and a stick; he filled it partially with water and set it next to the fire ring. The older Spartan had coated the outside with a thick sap, which was now dry, to keep the heat from cracking or burning the wood.

Fred handed Dr. Halsey a handful of plants he had not recognized; she set them by her laptop for the next day. The day's hunting was wrapped in fresh leaves "without Kelly, it wasn't as large a haul as usual, but there were several more small game animals that a single Spartan could take down. He gave the bundle to Lucy, who efficiently gutted them over the leaves and handed the meat to Tom. A full quarter of the meat and all the bones and organs went into the stewpot for Kelly; Tom spitted the other pieces and started the fire as Lucy took the leaves outside to bury them deep in the rich soil.

They then settled around the fire, Linda and Fred taking their turn

at watching over Kelly. She stirred when Fred gently changed the cloths covering her forehead and eyes, but he quietly told her to stay asleep.

Dr. Halsey checked Kelly's wound as the smell of roasting meat filled the cave. It looked healthier, and there was a pink flush to the skin around it, indicating that blood was finally flowing back into the area.

"We'll wake her in a bit," she told Fred. "She needs to eat; she couldn't keep down breakfast this morning." He nodded, glancing at the pot of stew.

"Hopefully she'll do better with soup."

"Just the broth," Dr. Halsey suggested. "We don't want her choking on a bone."

"There are some crackers in the MREs," Linda reminded them softly. Dr. Halsey nodded; they hadn't used the food, thinking to save it for an emergency, but Kelly should be able to keep the simple food down.

"We'll let her try a few," the doctor allowed. Linda went to the side wall and dug through the first food container, quickly finding the small package of square white crackers. Tom dipped the tip of his pinky into the stew and nodded, bringing it over to Dr. Halsey after swirling it gently to mix the contents.

"We don't want it too hot," he said softly. "The meat's cooked through. By the time we get her awake and up, it should be cool enough to drink."

"We'll put on a pot tomorrow morning and let it cook all day so it's more flavorful," Linda said. She turned to Kelly and removed the cloths from her eyes. "Kelly, wake up," she called quietly.

Kelly's eyes opened slowly, certainly not a normal Spartan reaction, and squinted almost immediately. The prone Spartan tried to rise and winced, probably in reaction to a headache. Chief Mendez, the only one who could support the larger woman without dirty armor on, quickly moved behind her and helped her sit up, bracing her back against his chest.

"My head's spinning," Kelly murmured, the cloths on her forehead slipping into her lap. She stared at them dully.

"We've got to get some food in you," Dr. Halsey said softly.

Kelly nodded in agreement but was clearly nauseous; Tom checked the stew temperature again and offered it to Linda, who took it and tipped it against Kelly's mouth gently. Kelly managed to swallow a mouthful before coughing and spilling some over the thermal blanket still covering her chest.

Fred was quick to use one of the cloths to clean the small mess up as the Chief gently tapped Kelly's back to assist her in breathing. She dragged lungfuls of clean air into her chest, her coughing lessening as she brought herself back under rigid control.

"Just a bit more," Dr. Halsey coaxed. Kelly smiled briefly, clearly a little more in control of herself and disliking the predicament. She accepted another mouthful, swallowing it quickly and trying to ignore the weak watery taste. Once most of the pot's water was gone and the bones, organs, and meat clearly showing, the Spartan shook her head in clear refusal of more, turning slightly green around the lips even as they watched.

"I think that's good for now," Dr. Halsey said softly. "But we'll need to sit up for a while so you can properly digest."

Kelly nodded and braced herself on her hands, letting the Chief shift out from underneath her. Fred took his place, his hard armor cold against her back as Kelly leaned against him gratefully.

"This is worse than anything I've ever had," she said in a voice too soft for any but Fred to hear. He smiled and laid an arm around her shoulders, gently hugging her.

"We're not used to being sick," he reminded her. "Most illnesses we get can be cured quickly now."

Kelly nodded silently, looking around. The rest of the clan was eating their portions of meat and organs, interspersed with veggies. Tom and Lucy shared the pot's contents, cracking the bones and sucking out the marrow. Linda was daintily nibbling on the hind leg of the local Big Rat "that was what she had named them" while Chief Mendez bulldozed his way through the other leg. Dr. Halsey got the forearms and was meticulously picking them clean. They didn't go hungry, but they didn't waste anything, either.

A jolt of pain as she moved her legs unconsciously made Kelly glance at her hip, moving aside the cloths to see the wound. The bag of skin was loose, moving like a popped blister when she prodded at it. Clear plasma flowed from it when the still-new seal over the incision Dr. Halsey had made broke under Kelly's questing fingers; she quickly wiped it clean with a piece of gauze from the medical kit right next to her.

Fred watched silently, chewing the breast piece of the second Big Rat "the toughest portion but, to him, the best-tasting. "Quit poking at it," he ordered lowly as Kelly continued poking at the area.

"Yes, sir," she replied, smiling slightly and shifting against his armor. "Do we have some water?"

Fred nodded; Linda tossed over her bottle so he wouldn't have to move. He caught it so Kelly wouldn't have to try "she was moving sluggishly and he didn't want her missing it" and handed it to his sister.

She drank it all quickly, recapping it carefully. "Thanks," she said when she was done. "I feel much better."

"Still, you need at least another day of rest before you can go back out," Dr. Halsey said, giving her a stern glare. "We need to keep an eye on your fever, for one, and make sure that wound isn't going to fester."

Kelly looked like she wanted to argue but Fred nodded in agreement with Dr. Halsey. He was still technically the commanding officer in the group. Even if he hadn't been, however, Kelly wouldn't go against Dr. Halsey's direct orders. She was, after all, a doctor, and implicitly trustworthy. All the Spartans had been trained to listen to their bodies and a doctor " and obey them, if possible. She would benefit from another day's rest.

Tom banked the fire and refilled the stewpot with cold water from the purification system at the back of the cave, filling it half-way with water and adding cuts of meat, organs, and bones from the last of the Big Rats they had caught that day. He set it into the coals to simmer overnight, heaping still-hot ash around the sides and adding small sticks " not enough to cause an actual blaze but to feed the coals.

Linda and Lucy gathered the dishes and took them out to wash; they didn't leave them overnight any more, not after finding a rather large creature that looked like a cross between a beaver and rat with the forearms of a monkey going through their plates just outside the cave, licking the remnants of dinner from them. When they came back, Kelly had fallen asleep again, though she woke at their soft tread as they rejoined the clan.

Fred laid her on her back gently; Kelly missed the warmth of her suit as her bare back touched the cold stone floor. The thermal blanket was hardly large enough to cover her overly-tall body, but the warmth of the fire " which was close-by " kept her from shivering as she drifted to sleep. It helped that Linda lay down next to her, opposite the fire to reflect its heat and be close-by if Kelly had any problems in the night.

Lucy and Tom curled up together, back-to-back as per usual, on the opposite side of the fire. Dr. Halsey slept near her laptop under one of the thermal blankets. Chief Mendez used another as he fell asleep near the entrance of the cave, while Fred mirrored him on the other side. Keen Sacrifice, without the need for sleep, nevertheless shut down each night, his blue eye going dark usually as soon as dinner was finished. They could rouse him with a word if necessary, but since he continued to be obstinate about their radio signal, everyone but Dr. Halsey and Lucy ignored him.

All but one slept lightly, as they did every night; Kelly snored softly, the depth of her sleep revealing just how exhausted and sick she was. Linda, hearing her start to turn over, reached out an arm in her sleep and trapped her sister on her back to keep her from injuring her hip further.

\_~~Next Morning~~\_

Kelly woke slowly, her thoughts muddled as she squinted her eyes against the strong sunlight streaming in through the vine doorway. Everyone else was already up; Linda noticed Kelly stirring and gently sat her up, crouching on her left with one armored arm behind her sister's shoulders to support her.

"How are you feeling, Kelly?" she asked, moving the thermal blanket and cloths to check on the wound. It looked better.

"Groggy," Kelly answered honestly. "And thirsty."

Linda handed her a full water bottle immediately; she had anticipated the need. Kelly swallowed half of it, breathing deeply when she was finished. "Let's get some breakfast in you," Linda suggested as Kelly recapped the bottle.

"Gotta use the restroom first," Kelly responded, pulling her legs up to stand. Linda shook her head and eased another arm under her sister's knees, lifting her with ease. She carried her unarmored sister to their privy â€" thankfully, they had clearing the path to it so Linda wasn't worried about Kelly brushing against the various poisonous plants out there and taking a turn for the worst.

When they came back to the cave, Tom had the stewpot dug out of the ash. Linda was pleased to see that it had survived the night without much damage â€" the sap was thinned in some places where the heat had been too fierce and melted it, but all in all, it was still in good shape.

Kelly didn't protest as Linda set her back down on the cave floor, this time with her back to a pillar of smooth rock so she could sit up on her own. Tom brought over the stewpot and Kelly took gentle sips of it, refusing to be fed like an invalid. She couldn't bring herself to drink more than half of it, however; her stomach felt smaller than usual. Everyone else ate breakfast â€" solid foods, which Kelly envied slightly â€" as she placed the pot next to her, wedged between two small rocks to keep it upright.

"Lucy, Linda, and I will hunt today," Fred said once everyone was finished with breakfast. "We don't need two guards outside; we haven't seen anything try our cave since that last pack of wolves."

Everyone nodded in agreement; Tom agreed without noticeable hesitation. "We can bring in more game, too," he said. "I'll get better at stew." Kelly quirked the side of her mouth in a slight grin as he smiled apologetically at her.

Dr. Halsey inspected Kelly's wound as the other four Spartans left the cave. Chief Mendez went with them to use the privy and apparently decided to sit with Lucy at the ravine mouth that led to the cave because he wasn't back when the doctor finished her examination.

"You'll be up and about tomorrow," she told Kelly, placing a fresh wet cloth over the inflamed area. "But stay down today," the doctor said warningly. "Otherwise you might break it open again and it'll take longer to heal."

"Yes, doctor," Kelly said, a slight smile in her voice. Dr. Halsey smoothed a hand down the Spartan's crooked hair, chuckling softly at the indignant look that crossed the younger woman's face at the gesture.

She gave Kelly two water bottles, a pack of crackers to nibble on if possible â€" she needed something with more substance than watery stew â€" and a basket to weave out of the thin vines that grew nearby to stave off boredom. Kelly completed three by noon, and had just started experimenting with the vines to make a thick pad for sleeping on when everyone came back for lunch in the early afternoon.

Some days, they ate on the go, bringing back enough for Dr. Halsey, Chief Mendez, and whoever was on guard. This time, however, they spent a good thirty minutes making lunch and then kept Kelly company for another hour. It was a quiet day; Kelly succeeded in making a passable sleeping pad and gave it to Dr. Halsey to test. Linda, having seen her efforts, spent the latter half of the afternoon bringing armfuls of the thin vines " along with a few loads of thicker vines for a bigger pad " back to the cave after carefully drowning any creatures in them and washing any poisonous residue from neighboring plants off in the pond above the cave.

By late evening, when everyone found their way back to the cave, Kelly had successfully woven two mats out of the thin vines and was working on a third from the thicker vines. Linda immediately joined her, weaving sections for Kelly to attach to her pad like a quilt. Once dinner was roasting, Lucy joined the two females; the three of them managed to finish the pad quickly. They slid it into Kelly's sleeping spot as Fred took the invalid Spartan out to the privy for the night.

They returned just in time for dinner, which for Kelly included a mushy stew that had been cooking since noon and some more crackers. Once she was finished with the full pot of stew and pack of crackers, she even tried a little meat, but it was too much too soon and she fought to keep her dinner down after her experiment.

"Your appetite will be back with a vengeance tomorrow," Dr. Halsey told her with a sympathetic smile.

Kelly nodded and lay back on the soft " and surprisingly warm " pile of vines that now made her bed. She would have to do the same for Dr. Halsey and Chief Mendez, who currently had the thinner pads from the smaller vines. The armored Spartans wouldn't need such beds " the gel layer between armor and skin was comfortable enough to sleep in, especially when it was kept at a constant warm temperature by the suits' temperature controls.

Dr. Halsey checked Kelly's thigh once more as Lucy and Fred took the dishes outside to clean. Everyone settled in to sleep in their usual positions, with Linda behind Kelly again to keep her from moving in her sleep. It was a comfortable silence that descended on the group as they drifted off to sleep.

## 6. Diary Entries

\_Sorry for the long delay! I had a medical emergency at the end of April " my lungs suddenly decided to screw with my life and sent me to the hospital for over a week. I'm getting better slowly now, though I will have to take four finals between now and August to complete my courses so I can move on in college. \_

\_As a note: this chapter is all diary entries from Dr. Halsey's computer, written by Fred or Dr. Halsey. Enjoy! I've left room for you all to fill in what blanks you want to (or don't!). \_

**\*\*Chapter 5: Diary Entries\*\***

\_Day 79 " Dr. Halsey remains ill. I have finally accepting a

temporary position as "note taker" for the group. Kelly continues to be angry at herself for allowing the doctor to be bitten by some sort of toad thing. The wound may be lethal; it is too early to tell. Dr. Halsey sometimes slips into dreams or memories â€" I cannot tell which. See attached records of transcripts Linda has been keeping of the murmurs we can make out. \_

\_We have the toad-thing hanging on the wall like some sort of prize. I don't know how to use the Gene Machine, as I call it, to catalog its genetics for Dr. Halsey's reports on the planet's animals. It is ugly, and about as large as my hand â€" so about seven inches wide. It closely resembles the toads of Earth from what I can tell from pictures, though it has a set of gills behind its six eyes.\_

\_Chief Mendez is wearing the pelt of one of the large carnivores â€" which we are calling wolves for lack of a better term. His clothing has long been reduced to rags by the clinging vines and brush.

\_

\_The pack of wolves we killed after the Pelican crash was only four â€" the packs we have come across since then have numbered a dozen at the least. We eradicate them when possible, pick off sentries when they are too large. \_

\_Even our armor is dirty and dinged, a thousand little scratches adding up from the jaws of wolves. They are fast, deadly, and â€" as Dr. Halsey explained â€" poisonous. Darts and knives dipped in their saliva paralyzes most prey quickly, including the elephant-sized herbivores that are the wolves' natural prey. Their meat is stringy and tastes like the local plants, but it is filling and cooks more easily than the tubers Kelly keeps digging up. I haven't found the patch she's been visiting. \_

\_Linda and Lucy are currently on guard duty. Kelly and Tom are hunting again. We have fed Dr. Halsey almost exclusively MREs, thinking it would help to have better than half-seared, half-raw meat or Kelly's attempts at cooked planets and tubers. \_

\_Dr. Halsey is waking.\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 80 â€" Dr. Halsey is quiet again. It was a difficult night, but she seemed to recognize me â€" or at least my armor. She called me John this morning when I took her outside to get some fresh air, even when I had taken off my helmet. Told me things I don't think I should know, about the Spartan II program. About our clones â€" the ones that were sent to our families to explain away the kidnapping of so many children. She apologized. Talked about how we should be saving every life we could. <em>

\_I think Chief Mendez is rattled. He stays close to the doctor, fetches her water and cools her brow. The medication we have given her seems to have no effect â€" though it could also be saving her life. We simply don't know. \_

\_Kelly hasn't come back into the cave since Dr. Halsey was bitten. I think she might be eradicating the toad population. She checks in occasionally with a green light when I ask after her. Linda said she's going to look for her, and took Tom with him. Lucy is on guard

outside. \_

\_The baskets woven from vines are starting to stink. It's subtle but clearly there. \_

\_I\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 80, Entry 2 â€" Dr. Halsey had a seizure. No details yet. She hasn't spoken since it ended four hours ago. We're all in the cave now. It is difficult to imagine losing her.<em>

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 87 â€" Dr. Halsey woke this morning, as she is wont to do, but this time she asked where her laptop was. Keen Sacrifice seems to think she is on the mend, though he hardly speaks to anyone except Lucy. I am less optimistic. I have seen wounded animals with a last spark of will drag themselves a few feet further before collapsing.<em>

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 90 â€" Fred asked me to reclaim the note-taking process. I have no memory of being bitten, nor of the subsequent days since them. I have only just woken from a coma, which is a miracle considering our medical supplies â€" or lack thereof. I am thin and weary, but alive. Our MREs are nearly depleted, as is our stash of counter-poison products. <em>

\_Clearly, this toad â€" see attached references and report on its genetic structure â€" contains a toxin similar to the common drugs used in surgeries, used to cause a functioning state of being with attached memory loss. This is much more powerful than any I have encountered before, however. \_

\_Fred is wary around me and seems burdened. I wonder what I said while I was unable to control myself. It isn't very noticeable â€" he is polite and all of the Spartan IIs keep an eye on me as I putter around the cave, though I am too weak to go far or for long. Yet it is there. The same wariness John displayed after I told him about the details of the Spartan II program, about the clones. \_

\_Perhaps that is what I told Fred. I cannot ask him â€" he doesn't stay around to talk much. All of the Spartans are spending more time in the brush than in the cave. It might be claustrophobic for them, but the weather outside is hardly more welcoming. As I postulated, winter has set into the jungle. The trees are frosted each morning, and I wake shivering even with a thermal reflection blanket, usually two from where someone put theirs on me. The Spartans' armor is showing signs of abuse and overuse; I haven't seen any of them take it off fully since I woke three days ago. \_

\_My thoughts are still jumbled. \_

\_Lucy and Keen Sacrifice, the Forerunner ancilla, seem to have made a bond of friendship. Lucy still doesn't speak, but I have a feeling that Keen Sacrifice is able to read her in much the same way Tom does. I have yet to develop all of the nuances for communicating with



the Spartan, but she seems to accept me as both a medical doctor and a person concerned for her welfare. \_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 104 â€" It is clear that we are not nearly the biggest or "baddest" predators out here. Fred brought back an elephant's second left rear femur, dragging it along with a hefty steak. The marks in it were clearly from some kind of predator or scavenger, but the furrows they had dragged were nearly as wide as my fist and several centimeters deep. The creature(s) that did this is obviously large and flies, because Fred said he found the remains in a large clearing with trample marks but no trail to or from the kill. <em>

\_It makes me grateful for the cave roof over my head. The femur was cracked for marrow, and judging by the quick line of the break, this creature had no problem breaking it open.\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 185 â€" We found what made those giant teeth marks on the local elephant creatures. I am calling it a dragon, for lack of a better term. It attacked a herd of elephants â€" the term should really be "slaughtered" â€" in front of Fred and Tom, who wisely hung back. They describe the creature as being at least twenty feet long, including a thick tail with a barbed end that it swung to pulverize the skull of a male elephant. It was a deep green in color, its scales tinted at the edge in a lighter green. Its wings â€" gigantic and certainly the creature's weakness â€" were a lighter green and webbed like a bat's. Its jaw was built like a crocodile's, with a thick, blunt snout and nostrils at the top. Its eyes were set forward in its skull, as is any predator's, and quite small for its face. Its ears, however, made up for the lack of eyesight. See attached sketches Tom was able to render.<em>

\_The herd's defenses â€" a tactic similar to the elephants on Earth, who surround their young with trunks and tusks out â€" were useless. Even their acidic saliva that Tom said they smeared on the dragon did nothing to the creature. Perhaps its scales protect it â€" when Fred got some of it on him while hunting a female elephant, it nearly burned through his armor. \_

\_The dragon doesn't appear venomous. It doesn't need to be. Its four thick legs are tipped with four talons and a dew-claw, each large and strong enough to pierce the thick hide and fur of the elephants. Its preferred attack is stooping on an elephant, much like an eagle on a salmon but on a much bigger scale. Instead of snapping its neck, it tends to drop its meal from heights of two hundred meters. \_

\_The field is a bloody mess, Fred says. The dragon was sleeping in the remains of its kill when Fred and Tom left, eager to get away from the creature's killing ground. I hope my Spartans do not encounter the beast when it is hunting. They might withstand a glancing blow â€" but somehow, I doubt it. They are not in the best condition.\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 206 â€" There is little I can say. The cold of winter is leaving the jungle around us, finally. I woke this morning without a

shiver. I have catalogued all animals that my Spartans have managed to bring me within the past 200 days. I should have done it more slowly, for I now have nothing but rechecking when they bring in plants to see if we have catalogued them yet. Most times, we have. It is rare to find something new now. <em>

\_The elephants have moved on, heading for the north pole of the planet. With them, I believe, went the dragon. We haven't seen her â€" or him â€" for several weeks, as measured by Earth's time.\_

\_I haven't seen Kelly in several days, which isn't particularly worrying. She is probably scouting further afield again. Fred and Linda say that her signal is strong on their FOF tags, though, so she can't be that far. Perhaps she is tired of the tension building in this cave. \_

\_Chief Mendez and I argued again, last night. It was the same topic: the Spartan III program. Lucy and Tom tried to intervene, but they do not have the emotional or social conditioning to do it without their fists, especially since Chief Mendez is their CO. Fred and Linda were out guarding. I have no doubt they heard the yelling, though. \_

\_I will try to speak to Lucy again. She says nothing, still, but I know she could if she wanted to. What did she see that so traumatized her? Tom knows â€" but he will not say anything about it to me. It's classified. \_

\_Imagine that. Something classified that I don't know. If I had a connection to the UNSC databases and Cortana back, I would get the information. It's my program; I have a right to know what happened to children who were trained using barbarian versions of my Spartan II program. \_

\_Or perhaps, as I begin to suspect, I am merely an old bitch with a grudge that I was left out of the Spartan III program. Chief Mendez certainly thinks so.\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 237 â€" We found Kelly yesterday. She's missing a finger â€" her left pinky. We don't know what happened. She checked in with Fred, saying she was coming back and a day's hard hiking away. She found a new spot for our camp. The wolves have started moving in, despite the Spartans' slaughtering of their packs when they do invade within a day's walk. <em>

\_She was exhausted and disoriented. Something had bitten off the finger, leaving her with a bloody stump â€" which I have bandaged â€" and poison that has affected her mental state. She wandered in circles before Fred noticed her FOF tag retracing its steps and went out to find her. \_

\_What slowed the fastest Spartan down so much that something could bite her pinky finger off? I have treated her with the last of the medicines. Several plants have promising potential as medicinal treatments, as do several animals. I should have been pursuing developing medicines from them, not cataloguing the rare new finds and trying to get Keen Sacrifice â€" whom I haven't seen in days, either â€" to boost our signal to Earth. \_

\_I do not have the equipment to clone a new finger for Kelly. She is lying in the back of the cave, near the cool wall of water against the heat outside. Linda is tending her for the moment, cooling her brow and keeping her down when she tries to get up, which she does often. We have stripped her armor â€" it lies stacked a few feet from my laptop. \_

\_It hurts to see her so sick. My Spartans never get sick. They get wounded â€" and sent to a hospital. I think it is a shock for our first major injury, that we cannot merely clone a replacement and give Kelly a clean bill of health a few hours later. Is this what our ancestors felt, when they faced cancer and tumors and severed limbs that we fix easily now? I do not like the feeling of helplessness.

\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 238 â€" Kelly seems to be recovering, though it is hard to tell. She is reluctant to say anything about what happened, though it is also possible she cannot hear us. She seems disoriented and only responds to Linda's attempts at sign-language, using the military code they all know. I do not know if she has noticed the missing finger yet. Yet she gets excited every time I come into her range of vision, and keeps trying to say something. We cannot understand it.<em>

\_She is slipping back into sleep again right now, her bandaged hand in my lap as I recheck the wound. She sleeps more deeply than I can ever remember her â€" or any of my Spartans â€" doing. It is good to see her face relax; she looks much more young and innocent when she is so deeply asleep her unconscious mind forgets to hold that stern visage to her features. \_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 240 - When Kelly woke yesterday, apparently completely well, she described what had happened. She had been on her way back with a new species of animal that seemed, of all things, very friendly. The specimen she was bringing back had been just hatching from a large egg when she stumbled across the nest and killed the mother in self-defense. <em>

\_The hatchling imprinted upon her and followed her around. She described it as looking like a duck, with fur instead of feathers and a alligator's thin snout instead of a bill. It was also either flightless or unable to fly yet; its wings seemed more for show than anything. Thinking it might make a good pet, she had been bringing it home when it accidentally wandered into a wolves' den and led the pack straight back to Kelly. \_

\_She had been unable to save the little creature, which was where her pinky had gone â€" she had tried to pull it from a wolf's mouth. The pack was small, one of the ones the Spartans have been whittling down to manageable portions. They have been preparing for a last assault on the den to knock the pack out for good. \_

\_Kelly managed, barely, to kill the remaining four wolves, though it was a close call. The saliva from the wolf that had eaten her pet â€" which she hadn't named but called "Thing" â€" wormed its way quickly into her system and made her disoriented and confused. \_

\_I am unsure about what made Kelly try to save the animal. She has never been especially nurturing. Perhaps it is her maternal instincts that have been repressed for so long thanks to the emotional and social conditioning of their training. Perhaps she was merely lonely, or misses John. Or maybe the creature imprinted and she just couldn't leave it to its death. My Spartans are, first and foremost, guardians. \_

\_Her example, however, made Linda and Fred order her not to leave the immediate surroundings of the cave anytime soon. She is adjusting to the loss of her finger, but I think she is more annoyed than hurt about it. I told her that the cut was clean "if we get picked up by humans, we will be able to clone a replacement. \_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 250 " Well, the Spartans have clearly lost a few marbles, if you'll pardon that ancient expression. Each one has managed, in the past ten days, to secure companions from the nest. <em>

\_Kelly has the most dangerous, I think; she managed to sneak into and out of a wolf den and bring back a pup with its eyes still closed. She thinks she can tame the thing. I used the surgical kit " practically useless, as most of our injuries aren't deep or require suturing, with the exception of Kelly's finger " to remove its venom sacks in the roof of its mouth, so at least it won't poison everyone. She feeds it every two hours, as attentive as any mother to a babe. It has yet to be named, though I hear her calling it "Ripper" softly.\_

\_Fred followed Kelly's example and got a small bird " hardly larger, full grown, than his palm " to imprint on him just after hatching. It sits on his shoulder constantly now, and trills what sounds like comments into his ears when his helmet is off. It seems to enjoy snuggling into his long hair " though "long" means it reaches the nape of his neck, only slightly over military code length. Its name is High Pitched, obviously after its voice that can be quite the nuisance.\_

\_Linda has adopted a creature that will grow to be the size of a medium dog back on Earth. It is currently barely big enough to fill my palm and resembles a koala bear, with the stiff grey fur, grey fur, and sort neck. However, the adults of this species that we have observed are sky and reclusive, much like Linda herself, and peaceful herbivores despite their wickedly-long claws and powerful arms.\_

\_Tom and Lucy managed to find a pair of pets " sister and brother, Tom says " from a nest of snakes, which seem to be taking to their surrogate parents well. Lucy's snake, a dark green mottled with brown markings, is almost always coiled up around her neck. Since Lucy doesn't speak to us, I don't know if it has a name, but I swear she speaks to the snake. Tom adopted another snake, which he has named "Prince" for the way it loves to sit on his head when his helmet is off like a crown. They are only a foot long now, but they will grow to be large enough to swallow a small elephant. \_

\_Kelly brought back a small rodent for my own pet, though the

creature appears sickly more than anything else. I have tried to coax it back to life, but I do not think it will survive another week.

—

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 259 â€" The rodent didn't survive the night; his tiny little heart finally gave out somewhere around midnight, judging by the amount of light in the cave when I heard him stop breathing. It rained while we were sleeping, which means I have to check the radio today for water damage.<em>

\_Kelly's pup is toddling around behind me, movements still clumsy. She follows it like she is the pet and he â€" the pup's name is officially Ripper â€" the master, seemingly scared that it will injure itself. Fred's bird has started flying and is apparently intelligent enough to scout for water, food, and danger. \_

\_The pair of snakes the two IIIs have been raising are a nuisance, eating everything they can get into their greedy gullets and growing daily. They are currently just big enough that Tom and Lucy struggle to carry them all day around their necks, and continue to grow.\_

\_Lucy's koala-like creature, whose name is now "Grey Eyes," toddles around after her or clings to her armor like a burr. Her eyes are brown, not grey, but they have darkened since they first opened.

—

\_It is noisy during the nights now, with Kelly still feeding Ripper every two to four hours and the snake twins â€" I have taken to calling them Prince and Duchess, which seems to please Lucy well enough â€" slithering away to find food when they are hungry. \_

\_I am glad that my Spartans have something to entertain themselves with, but I cannot help but be wary of what may happen in the future. If Prince or Duchess gets hungry enough, they may turn on us â€" and once they reach their adult growth, even a Spartan in full MJOLNIR armor will be hard-pressed to avoid being constricted to death.

—

\_Chief Mendez seems to view the whole thing with a touch of humor, which is quite infuriating. These are Spartans, not children. Yet should I begrudge them the chance to act like children? They didn't have a chance once I got my hands on them, and judging from what Tom and Chief Mendez say â€" sometimes unwittingly â€" neither did the IIIs. \_

\_Kelly told me this morning that Ripper will help them in hunting once he is full-grown. Tom and Lucy seem to believe their snakes will obey a command to strangle prey and bring it back to the cave; I have to admit that their training sessions involving food have had a good amount of success. Fred's bird is useless except as a scout, but apparently she does well with that task. I have learned to distinguish her alarm calls from her other calls, at least. Linda's pet is content to climb through the stalagmites on the ceiling and eat leaves and branches from her hand when he isn't stuck to her armor.\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 259, Entry 2 - I just checked the radio and it is fine. The message seems inadequate to explain all that has happened to us. If someone found us today, they likely wouldn't recognize us. My hair is longer than I have ever allowed it to be; even the Spartans are allowing their hair to outgrow UNSC military code, though only slightly and mostly to protect against sunburn if they go outside without helmets on. Chief Mendez has a beard now, though he tries to keep it trimmed with Fred's knife, which accounts for the small cuts on his cheeks and chin.<em>

"\_Just keep living." That seems to be our motto now. I am more negative now about our chances of being found. The Centauri binary star system is far from Earth; it was, when the colony was established here, the farthest UNSC-controlled colony from Earth. All of our hopes lie with a planet over 500 light years away. The only things beyond this backwater system and its glassed champagne colony are a few Covenant bases â€" we think. We never proved it. We heard rumors, ships that got lost or made random jumps and found Covenant mining platforms when following the Cole Protocol. \_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 365 â€" Happy one-year anniversary. Ripper and Grey Eyes are wrestling in the back of the cave. The larger wolf is gentle on the koala, much as Kelly is gentle on Linda as they work out against each other. The nervous energy is bordering on dangerous.<em>

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 490 â€" I rarely update any more, I know. My laptop has suffered from the years of abuse. Once the dragon found our cave, we had to move. It started tearing the hillside apart to get at Fred and the smell of its youngling's blood still on his armor. The thing had attacked Fred, who had no choice but to kill it with one of the spears dipped in wolf venom. We left during a rainstorm â€" it can't fly in bad weather, remember that. We've found a new cave, but it keeps following us. We'll have to face it soon. <em>

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 500 â€" The dragon is outside. The Spartans are gearing up to take it out. Chief Mendez is going to join them, despite his fever. I need to be on hand. We will have casualties. <em>

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 500, Entry 2 â€" The death toll is not too high. Thank all the gods, old and new, for that. I usually thank science for things, but this time we needed divine intervention. <em>

\_Chief Mendez got the last of the medical supplies when I put his chest back together after a glancing blow from the dragon's claws. He may not make it. See attached report and medical scan.\_

\_Linda and Kelly are the best off, and they are sore and have several broken bones. Tom is lying on his stomach with Lucy, his head in her lap as she gently cleans out the vicious swipe he took across his back. Fred is trying to rotate his shoulder, which Kelly popped back into place. I will order them to strip off their armor once they have

tended to their companions; I need to assess the damage.\_

\_Fred is mourning the loss of High Pitched, and Lucy is torn over Duchess's death. Ripper is missing an ear, but I have nothing except local antiseptics and analgesics with which to treat him. Kelly is currently tending to him in the back of our new cave. Even Grey Eyes fought, though she was quickly out of the running when the dragon threw her into a tree. Linda fought harder after that. \_

\_They are all staying close to the Chief. I will sit with him when I have noted the events. They should be remembered.\_

\_The dragon is still sitting outside, her throat finally cut after what seemed like hours of hit-and-run attacks. She had a weak spot just behind the jaw, apparently, which Kelly took full advantage of while Chief Mendez was distracting it. Without her speed, it would never have succeeded. \_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 501 â€" Senior Chief Petty Officer Franklin Mendez did not survive the night. His wounds were too grievous and he passed away just minutes ago. I pronounced and then came to write it down. Lucy and Tom are clearly not taking his death well; they are sitting in the rain at the head of the cave, Prince coiled over both their shoulders. It should be dark, I feel, but the constant sunshine gives this place a sense of happiness. We will have to move again, once we have buried the Chief.<em>

\_Fred has volunteered to carve a wooden headstone for the Chief. I would like to say that I knew the man â€" but as I think about all of our interactions, I realize that he was, to me, a soldier, and I, to him, a doctor. I do not even know if he would prefer to be cremated, but it would not matter â€" the rainy season has just started, and will not cease before he begins to decompose. As practical a man as he was, he will understand â€" and at least we can bury his body, as opposed to what would likely happen if he had died in battle on some planet, trying to save it from the Covenant.\_

\_These are morbid thoughts. I continue writing simply because to stop means facing what has happened. Despite our differences, I respected the Chief greatly â€" he was an excellent trainer for the Spartans, both generations that he was a part of â€" and I find his absence to beâ€¦ I cannot put it into words. My movement through the five stages of grief should be starting now, but I suspect I am suffering from some other mental illness that is slowing down my acceptance. Losing one of the people you've lived so closely to for nearly two years, and known , it seems, foreverâ€¦ It is different than dealing with the death of a close friend or loved one. \_

\_I will offer grief counseling to the Spartans, but I have the feeling that it is I, not them, who needs it.\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 730 â€" Two years. <em>

\* \* \*

><p><em>Day 920 â€" We are found.<em>

## 7. Rescue Mission

\_Thanks for the reviews! I'm glad you all liked the diary entries. Now it's time to get moving on the original storyline. Thanks for your patience as I set the scene.\_

### \*\*Chapter 6: Rescue Mission\*\*

John strode quickly to the bridge in response to the summons. They had been en route for two weeks, and the Sangheili around him were used to his presence on the ship. They saluted him in the human fashion and then dipped their heads in respect. He had made a name for himself in the past weeks as a trainer and sparring partner, beating all but the best Veterans onboard, and he was improving daily with the harder sparring partners.

Most of the humans on board still stuck to the bottom portion of the ship with the showers and large room that served as bunks, mess hall, and rec room all in one. The Double Trouble troops were more integrated, but the cultural differences and history between the human and Sangheili soldiers aboard had made for a few tense days at the beginning.

John smirked slightly to himself. He and Thel had finally managed to redirect most of the anger and tension with weekly contests of strength and wits. So far, they served both to give an honorable way to settle disputes between Elites and humans â€" though the power imbalance was still a touchy subject â€" and provide entertainment and sport. There was no betting allowed, but John knew the human troops and possibly some of Double Trouble's Elites had been taking in extra food rations.

The Spartan clunked onto the bridge and snapped a salute.

"Come in, Spartan," Thel said quickly, nodding in welcome. Cortana greeted him with an excited grin; she was clearly holding something back she wanted to yell as soon as he came onto the bridge. She had been granted AI status on the Sangheili ship and was running it in tandem with its crew of Sangheili engineers and pilots.

"Arbiter." John nodded respectfully to the Arbiter. Technically, their authority on this ship was equal, but John mostly deferred to Thel's judgments about his Sangheili, as he did the Spartan's when it came to the humans.

"We have recently intercepted anâ€| interestingâ€| transmission."

Cortana giggled and John almost blinked in surprise. He had spent the past few weeks returning to the state of mind he had been in before meeting Rebecca, where he kept his face stoic even behind his visor. "What kind of transmission?" he asked quickly.

"A ship has reported from the binary star system you call Centauri. They have come across a dangerous planet while searching for potential mining planets and intercepted a transmission from it. It is human in origin, we believe."



John raised an eyebrow. "Cortana, is there-"

"A colony?" Cortana grinned and gestured with her hands; a map popped up on one of the screens. "There was. It was glassed years ago, one of the first to fall in the war once we figured out what was going on."

"Centauri system. Beta star." John frowned slightly.

"But the signal originated from here." One of the planets orbiting the Alpha star lit up, its information scrolling onto another screen. "A dangerous planet, by the one report we have of those who tried to explore it. Almost every creature is larger than Earth's mice, and lethally venomous."

"What is the signal?" John finally asked, tired of Cortana's teasing. She grinned quickly and played the recording.

At the first inhale, John stiffed. He knew that inhale â€" and he knew the voice that followed it.

"SOS. This is Dr. Catherine E. Halsey, with several Spartans and Senior Chief Petty Officer Franklin Mendez, requesting immediate evac. We are stranded on Alpha Centauri's third planet, designation C 847 h. Prioritization code: Victor Zero Five dash Three dash Sierra One Zero Four. Spartan survivors present."

"Fred," John murmured. "That is Fred's prioritization code." He wasn't sure what he was feeling â€" John took a deep breath. "Fred's alive."

"As is Dr. Halsey," Cortana murmured. "And, by the sounds of it, other Spartans. Though this message is old. They may not have survived almost three years on that planetâ€|"

"They're Spartans," John argued almost instantly. "They're alive."

Cortana raised her hands and nodded. "I know they are, John." He frowned slightly; he disliked being called that on the bridge.

Admiral Hood's voice came in over the bridge's comm unit; the communications officer sent it to the Arbiter's station where John could listen to the Admiral.

"I trust you have received the report, Admiral Hood," Thel said into the bank of controls at his fingertips.

"I have, Arbiter. Is the Master Chief there?"

"Right here, sir," John said quickly.

"Good. If there are any Spartans still on that planet, we could use their help against the Brutes. But Alpha Centuari is 500 light years from Earth, and at least two weeks from our current position. We would be at the Brute's homeworld before anyone from our fleet managed to arrive."

"And Fred went missing before our alliance was even dreamed of," John

said when the Admiral was finished speaking. "So asking the ship that intercepted the transmission to bring them to us could put everyone in danger."

Thel nodded thoughtfully. "I would not risk a confrontation if it could be helped," the Sangheili said quietly. "Our exploration troops do not yet speak your language. There would be many casualties, on both sides."

John nodded. "Admiral Hood, I know that striking now while the Brute homeworld is in chaos is imperative, but having more Spartans would certainly tip the odds more in our favor."

"If we sent our fastest ship, it would take eight of your days to reach the planet," Thel added, looking over a schematic one of the bridge's crew handed him. "If it found any that remain and returned immediately, we would only delay our attack by two of your days."

"If we found even one Spartan, it would make a difference," Admiral Hood mused. "We need stronger commanders and leaders. We have been shifting through the promotions but To be honest, John, you're going to have a lot weighing on your shoulders. You've fought Brutes before, and most of our commanders and squad leaders have not. The veterans in our group will not be led by Sangheili. I know most Spartans are not used to leading groups."

"And Dr. Halsey is a valuable asset," Cortana chimed in. "Her work with genetic manipulation could be vital to understanding what was used to create the War Chieftain. She is the most brilliant mind of this century."

Admiral Hood's voice was carefully formal as he spoke after a long moment of silence. "Arbiter, I cannot order you to pursue this, but I am asking if you would be willing to commit one ship to bringing home whoever is still alive from that planet."

Thel's mandibles clicked in a grin. "Of course, Admiral Hood. I am invested in our success against the Jiralhanae. And I pledged to find those of your missing soldiers when possible." Admiral Hood thanked him quickly.

"We will delay our attack by five full days, to allow you some time to explore the planet if needed. But we will need you back as soon as possible."

"Stealth cruiser," the Arbiter mused when Admiral Hood signed off to give orders to the rest of the fleet. "Do you have a team in mind, Spartan?"

The Chief nodded quickly. "I think we should take an all-human crew," he said. "As far as we know, whoever we find will not know about the Sangheili-human alliance. I think the idea of getting in a Covenant ship without blowing it will be a good first lesson."

"Very well, but you will need to take at least a pilot, engineer, and one crew member," the Arbiter said. "And since none of your humans have learned our full language yet, they will have to be Sangheili."

John nodded slowly. "They'll need to be as unthreatening as possible. Small."

Cortana chuckled. "Sangheili don't come in "small" size, John."

"I believe I know of some who may be of use to you," the Arbiter told the Chief with an amused click of his mandibles.

"I will assemble my team in the docking bay. Have your crew meet us there. Which ship are we taking?"

"I would suggest this one," Cortana said as the Arbiter mulled over the possibilities, bringing up a schematic of the DAV-class light corvette, *\_Shadow of Veracity\_*. "It is the fastest in the fleet and small enough to require only one or two crewmembers."

Thel nodded in agreement. "An excellent choice. Will you stay here or go with them, Cortana?"

"I'd like to go," she said immediately.

The Arbiter smiled slightly. "I will miss your presence," he said to both of them. "Good luck." It was a clear dismissal, though a friendly one; Cortana let John take her chip and integrated into his suit quickly. She disliked the loss of processing power, but being with John again, accessing the world through his suit, more than made up for it.

The Chief saluted and jogged to the bottom of the ship where his team waited. On the way, he and Cortana were silent, each engrossed in their own thoughts.

When he came into the garage that had been given over to the human troops, most of his soldiers were gathered in small groups, gossiping, playing games, or taking naps.

Senior Chief Lazlakovic, Spartan IV, noted his entrance and stood immediately, barking, "Chief on deck!" Everyone dropped their cards or game pieces and stood, saluting smartly; the ones who had been napping leapt up and copied their comrades with only a little eye-rubbing.

"Fall in," John ordered. He could tell this surprised his troops; they were used to his releasing them immediately. They formed into their ranks quickly, however, leaving holes that were filled when their Sangheili comrades were there. "We have received a transmission from the Centuari system, approximately 500 light years from Earth. There are survivors located on a planet in the system." His soldiers were too well-disciplined to start murmuring, but he could tell they were eager to hear more. "It appears that Dr. Halsey, as well as several Spartans, may still be alive."

*\_That\_* broke through the rigid at-attention stances as the humans glanced between each other in both trepidation and excitement.

"I will be taking several of you with me on a mission to retrieve them. They will be valuable assets in our war against the Jiralhanae. There may be as many as a dozen, and they have all been missing â€" Dr. Halsey included â€" since before the Sangheili-human alliance, so we will not be taking any Sangheili troops. I will need volunteers

for this mission â€" the planet we will be going to is labeled inhospitable due to the venomous creatures dirt-side."

Every soldier immediately volunteered; John looked over his troops, a small smile behind his visor forming on his lips.

"They respect you more than I would have thought possible," Cortana said quietly in her ear. "You've really made them all feel powerful."

John stored the comment to discuss later and focused on the matter at hand. "We will be taking the DAV-class stealth ship, \_Shadow of Veracity.\_ While a human ship would be preferable, there are none that can travel as quickly. Selenason." The human stepped forward smartly and saluted. "You will be in charge while I am gone," he said; she seemed slightly disappointed at this confirmation that she would not be with the rescue party.

The Chief turned to the general assembly. "Ridder, Smithers: you will be acting COs and report directly to Selenason. Naomi, Carter, Basky, Landsmen, Lazlakovic, you're coming with me. The rest of you will remain here and train. We have delayed the attack by five days to allow for this mission, but no more â€" and if we do not return, you will be the best human troops suited to leading other squads." It was a worst-case scenario, but John believed in planning for the worst.

"Dismissed," he barked. His chosen teammates immediately separated from the group and jogged to their bunks to pack; a few of the soldiers with a good eye for strategy packed a large crate full of supplies for the troops that would be leaving.

Within sixty seconds, the Chief's team stood in front of him, geared up and ready to begin. "Naomi, Carter, get the supplies," he ordered. "We'll meet you at the bay." The ship rumbled around them as they dropped out of Slipspace to make the transfer.

The two Spartan IVs hefted the large crate and double-timed it to the bay, arriving only just behind the Chief and the rest of their teammates.

Three Sangheili were waiting for them â€" one introduced himself in very smooth English as the pilot, N'hamee. John was impressed by the Arbiter's choice; all three were slightly smaller than the average Elite, spoke English easily, and were unarmed. It was a great show of trust that they were coming along.

"You've been briefed?" John asked the pilot as they loaded up into the Sangheili-human Peliship. The pilot sat in the cockpit and brought the ship to life with deft movements that belied a natural affinity for space flight.

"Yes, Master Chief," he answered. Carter and Naomi stored the crate of supplies in the Peliship's cargo bay as the rest of the troops strapped themselves into the seats along each side of the wall, which could convert between what was comfortable for Sangheili and for the Unggoy and humans. "We have also brought along a few surprises of our own. L'eto is versed in your human medicine as well as being an engineer without equal. N'kane is what you would call a "jack of all trades," I believe â€" he had made an extensive study of your suits

while onboard and will be able to repair your armor or our guests' before we rejoin the fleet, if necessary. The \_Shadow of Veracity\_ will be supplied even as we get aboard and prepare for Slipspace with enough food and gear " including your armor's equipment " to last twice the trip, in order to prepare for however many Spartans we find."

John nodded, thanking Thel silently for his foresight. They powered out of the docking bay and entered the quiet of space; John peered through the cockpit's window and saw dropships leaving the stealth ship to join with the Arbiter's destroyer. The former crew of the \_Shadow of Intent\_ would leave the ship evacuated.

The \_Shadow\_ was larger than most UNSC stealth-class ships. Its active camouflage generators were easily seen as the Peliship approached the ship. It had minimal shields, which had made them a favored target of UNSC battle cruisers in ship-to-ship wars, when they were in attendance and could be found.

"There are several possible survivors," John said quietly, accessing the files of unconfirmed deaths and sent them to the IVs' helmets. The pilot smoothly powered the ship towards the underbelly bay. "These pictures are dated. They will be wearing Mark IV armor."

The IVs all nodded in sync. "It's so exciting," Landsmen said over the private comm. "Can you believe it? Survivors, way out there? How the hell'd they \_get\_ out there, anyway?"

"Who knows?" Naomi chuckled.

"More importantly, who cares?" Carter agreed. "They're there, we're here, and we're gonna get our troops back."

"Focus, Spartans," John interjected, holding his own hopes tightly. "Keep your eyes peeled. There are organisms on the planet that, according to the reports, may be lethal even to us."

Basky slapped John's shoulder gently " well, gently for a Spartan " and a grin was evident in his voice when he said, "No disrespect, sir, but we're Spartans. We got this, and I'm sure your team's still alive."

The bay's shields opened, letting them in; N'hamee joined the Peliship to the dropship station smoothly, causing barely a bump as they came to rest. John was impressed with his skills; it was rare for a Sangheili to be an accomplished pilot because of their tendency to use their ships as battering rams against larger UNSC ships or ground troops.

They exited into the near-empty ship and the pilot immediately went to the bridge, with John in tow. The IVs would wait in the bay for the dropships that were bringing in human-edible food and supplies, including their armor's cleaning and maintenance equipment, while the engineer and single crewmember went to double check the ship's systems and Slipspace readiness.

Faster than John would have thought possible, even with such a small crew, the \_Shadow of Veracity\_ powered into Slipspace, leaving the Arbiter's ship to do the same as it played catch-up to the rest of the fleet.

\_Eight days,\_ John thought as he stood at the bridge's helm. He had never captained a ship before, but here he was â€" an entire Covenant stealth cruiser at his beck and call. The Spartan looked around appreciatively; while he had been on board Covenant ships before, the stealth cruisers were completely different inside.

The bridge was small, meant for a maximum of four crew members plus the Ship Master. The station at which John stood, where a Ship Master would usually sit, overlooked all of the screens which displayed data, readouts, intercepted communications trails, and other odds and ends that he would need practice to track.

N'hamee had showed him how to control the ship from his station but he would leave the driving up to the pilot, who was currently sitting at the head of the bridge, his heavy hands dancing across screens as he set the ship into its fastest cruise.

Carter and Naomi came into the bridge as John glanced through the interior cameras on the ship. All Covenant ships had them installed after the first successful ship-to-ship infiltration by Spartans.

"Permission to enter the bridge," Carter said from the doorway, snapping a crisp salute.

"Granted," John answered after a moment's pause while he waited for someone else to do so. It struck him that he was the final authority now â€" if any decision had to be made, \_he\_ would have to make it. It was both a welcome familiarity from his years of leading Spartans and an entirely different scenario.

Carter and Naomi came up to stand beside him, looking over the bridge. They both had their helmets off. "She's beautiful," Naomi said quietly. "Strong and fast and not at all delicate. Nothing like our stealth ships. I like purple. It suits her."

John and Carter shared a glance as John pulled off his helmet and ran a gloved hand through his hair. "She's not here to look pretty," the Spartan II reminded his teammate.

"Aye, sir, she's here to get us to your sibs as fast as possible," Naomi agreed with a light-hearted grin. "Though eight days without cryo and only you boys for company might just drive me nuts."

"Awww, Naomiâ€|" Carter whined, bumping his shoulder against hers. "We couldâ€| \_liven\_ it up for you, if you want," he said suggestively, wiggling his eyebrows.

John shook his head slightly, both amused and frustrated by the IVs companionship. They were on the bridge and on a mission â€" Marine-like fraternizing wasn't appropriate. They caught the movement and shared an expressive glance.

"What is our status for supplies?" John asked to keep their minds on the mission.

"We've got enough food for a month, if it's just us. If we have a dozen starved Spartans, we might have to ration a little, but nothing serious. The armor equipment is in good repair and waiting to receive

any of us â€" or our guests-to-be â€" in one of the rooms near the docking bay."

"We'll stay fit and in training on the trip," John ordered.

"Of course, sir." Both snapped salutes and left to unpack the supplies into several rooms â€" no large garages existed on the ship. John left N'hamee in charge of the bridge and went to join the IVs for some training. Though they didn't have a garage or gym, the docking bay was large enough to suit their needs â€" so long as they didn't throw anything around and damage the Peliship.

\_~~En Route~~\_

Naomi grunted, heaving upwards even as John pressed down.

"Come on, Naomi, get up!" Landsmen called encouragingly, though he was trapped under Lazlakovic. On the outskirts of the marked circle, Carter and Basky watched their teammates â€" John, Lazlakovic, and Carter against Basky, Naomi, and Landsmen â€" and waited to take someone's place.

Naomi twisted her hips and threw John; he rolled away and tapped out, standing at the edge of the circle and rotating his shoulder. Carter launched himself at Naomi; they tussled and rolled, colliding with Lazlakovic and Landsmen at one point.

"Keep your elbows in," John barked at Carter, who swung wide and tried to hit Naomi's side but just succeeded in getting himself trapped in a stranglehold.

"Ow! Sweetheart, that don't come off!" Carter yelled at Naomi, who was doing her best to drag him upwards with his arm behind his back.

"Call me 'Sweetheart' again and it will," Naomi growled, rabbit-punching him behind the ear. Carter cursed even as he sank to his knees; she hadn't hit hard enough to knock him out, but everything below his neck was tingly.

John shook his head slightly, both amused and unhappy with the spar. Naomi dragged Carter out of the circle and propped him against a stack of crates to watch; then she re-entered the circle.

John re-engaged and managed to take Naomi out by bodily throwing her out of the circle, which meant Basky came in. Landsmen had lost to Lazlakovic and joined Carter by the crates with Naomi; the two Spartan IVs still left in the circle surrounded John, grinning.

"I think we can call this a win for us," Lazlakovic called to Basky, chuckling.

"It's not over until he's out," the other IV replied.

"Party pooper," Naomi yelled. "Get him!"

The three Spartans went down in a tangle, fists, feet, and armor flying. John landed a hard punch to Basky's chest but the IV shrugged it off and locked an elbow around the II's chin, setting his feet and pulling the larger man's head down.

Off balance, John wasn't prepared to counter-attack when Lazlakovic jumped on his back, driving him to his knees. The MJOLNIR clanged dully "he had turned off his shields" and John was forced to roll when Basky rotated his head like a historical cowboy wrestling a steer to the ground. Lazlakovic took advantage of her position on top of him to pin John's arms behind his back, holding them there with her weight.

"Do ya yield?" Naomi asked as the two Spartans strained to hold the third.

John, unable to nod, sighed and answered, "I surrender." Basky released his helmet and Lazlakovic jumped off his back, landing smoothly. The Spartan II stood.

"An excellent sparring session," N'hamee said from his position on top of the Peliship, out of danger of flying armored Spartans. He and L'eto had finished their own sparring session "which involved a lot more defensive moves than John had seen an Elite use before" just moments before the Spartans started theirs.

John took his helmet off and accepted a towel from Naomi, wiping the sweat from his brow and hair. "Any suggestions?" he asked those around him, examining his helmet critically.

"We'd be unstoppable if we could stand as a unit," Lazlakovic said. "Even in pairs Or better, triples. But brass wants us leading soldiers. I don't know how well we can stand against a single Brute alone."

"We won't be alone," John reminded his second. "We'll have good men, women, and Sangheili behind us."

"And hopefully more Spartans," Carter chimed in cheerfully from where he was feeling along Landsmen's chest for broken ribs.

John nodded in agreement as Basky added, "How about we get something to drink and cool off? I'm beat. Literally."

"Where did you learn that wrestling thing you did with me at the end?" John asked as they trooped towards the supply crates. The blue-eyed Spartan grinned.

"I was raised on a farm with old-fashioned animals," Basky answered. "We'd wrestle the hogs for the tourists. They're pushovers compared to you, but they do love to put on a good show. The pigs, I mean."

John chuckled softly, shaking his head. "Well, if you put more strength into it, you could definitely crack a Brute's neck with that move, but you'd have to do it fast."

"And I'd need someone to watch my back, 'cause it takes all my attention not to get bit. I don't want Brute cooties."

"You're such a ten-year-old," Landsmen laughed, shoving Basky into the hallway's corridor playfully.

John steadied the Spartan IV, who smacked Landsmen on the helmet with



a smirk.

"Children, hands to selves," Lazlakovic said in her best impression of a first-grade teacher with unruly children in a small bus.

"But Mooooooom," Basky moaned in his best impression of a whiny child.

"I will hit you so hard you'll be shitting stars if you use that tone of voice again," the somewhat older woman promised, a slight snarl in her voice.

John was used to this bantering after a sparring session â€" it was the IV's way of reconnecting. Naomi opened the door to the supply room; everyone filed in and Landsmen immediately passed out water bottles. They sat on the beds on the starboard wall, taking off their helmets and gloves.

"Two days left," Landsmen sighed after taking a deep drink of the water, grinning.

John nodded slowly as he drained some of the water from his bottle. "We'll set up a separate room for whoever we find tomorrow, and prepare the medical bay as well."

"Expecting injuries, sir?" Lazlakovic asked, raising an eyebrow.

"The planet's indigenous lifeforms are highly toxic," Cortana said over the room's speakers. "Even if we find no one, there is a chance one of you could get injured while scouting."

"We'll have to be fast and careful," John said. "We plan for the worst."

"But hope for the best," Naomi reminded the Chief cheerfully. John glanced at her with a small, grateful smile.

"Losers make dinner," Lazlakovic reminded everyone. "And I don't know about you boys and girls, but I'm hungry enough to eat one of Basky's hogs right about now."

Basky laughed. "Mmmm, real baconâ€¦ Haven't had that since they torched the farm. Ma'd send me carepackages when I signed on, yanno?" He smiled dreamily. "She had the best cookin'." John noted that Basky's accent got thicker when he talked about his past. "We didn't clone anything; all natural, that was us." He wiggled his eyebrows seductively at Naomi as the three Spartans who had lost got up to break out their dinner. The female Spartan rolled her eyes.

\_~~Beta Centuari system~~\_

"Exiting Slipspace," N'hamee said quietly, tapping a control on his station. John braced himself as the ship decelerated almost immediately, slipping silently into real space and time. The viewscreens lit up immediately as Cortana analyzed their surroundings and N'hamee headed in-system. They had jumped to a position just outside the last planet â€" though they could have gotten closer, John wanted the hour it would take to move into C 847 h's orbit to examine the planet and scan for life readings.

"Life scan initialized," Cortana reported. "Though by the report on this planet, everything on it is large enough to register on my scans."

"Any communications?" John asked.

"Just the same distress message, sir" N'hamee reported, one hand cupping the radio over one ear to hear better.

"Send a message out, Cortana," John ordered. He paused and then spoke when the communications lit winked on. "This is Master Chief 117, calling all Spartans in the vicinity of Alpha Centauri. Please respond. Over."

They waited silently, the radio crackling with the same distress message over the bridge's speakers. "Again," John ordered, trying to ignore the possibility that there was no one to respond.

"This is Master Chief 117. I repeat, all UNSC personnel within range of this broadcast, respond immediately."

Naomi and Lazlakovic came to the bridge and stood silently as they listened to the repeating distress signal.

"Looks like we'll have to ground-pound, sir," Naomi said cheerfully when John waved for the radio to be turned off of the speakers.

"Ready everyone to go dirt-side," John ordered, not looking around. "Full combat gear."

"Aye, sir." Lazlakovic and Naomi snapped salutes and trotted off the bridge.

"I have a lock on the radio's origin," Cortana said quietly.

"Send it to my HUD," John ordered. "N'hamee."

"Sir?" The Elite turned slightly in his seat.

"We'll need you to pilot the Peliship and stay ground-side while we search. Stick the Veracity in geosynchronous orbit and get to the bay."

"Yes, sir," N'hamee agreed, turning back to his control panel. John placed his hand on the control center.

"Cortana, you coming or staying here?" he asked over the private comm.

"Are you crazy?" Cortana answered, flowing through his glove back into his suit effortlessly. Her chip was already in the base of his skull. "I'm coming with you, of course," she added when she was settled.

N'hamee followed the Spartan to the bay, where Naomi handed John a pistol, extra magazines, and a rifle. He secured everything, checked his suit's seals, and they loaded into the Peliship. Drawing a breath, John forced himself to focus on the mission "and not on

wondering who was left, if anyone.

John scanned the ground through the pilot's forward viewport as they came down through the thick atmosphere, directing them towards the equator of the planet opposite where the ship hung in geosynchronous orbit. He knew Cortana had done that purposefully; if his Spartans saw the Sangheili ship, they could very well brace for an attack, and he needed to catch them by surprise.

"The signal is coming from this location," he told the IVs as the Pelican approached for a final landing. "Guns out and ready. We don't know what could be waiting for us."

They all unlimbered their guns; N'hamee let the hatch hiss open as soon as they landed with a gentle thump. Around them, past the clearing, the planet's native jungle was silent as the predators hid from this new large thing in their midst and the prey hid from anything that noisy.

John took point; the IVs spread out as smoothly as though they had been working together for years. The pilot closed the hatch " he didn't want anything getting in and possibly killing him.

"Dead ahead, two hundred meters," John muttered over the private comm. "Hold positions. I'm going to call them."

The IVs all winked their acknowledgement lights green and John opened the all-hands frequency. "This is Master Chief Spartan-117. Does anybody read?"

He waited for a dozen beats of his heart; nothing but static over the radio. Frowning to himself " he was still holding onto a hope " he tried again. "This is Master Chief 117. Does anybody read? I repeat, are there survivors here?"

"Maybe their helmets are off, Chief," Lazlakovic said quietly from where she was crouching at his heel, their armor almost touching as she covered his six.

John nodded, though he doubted it. "Or their radios might have lost power," Carter commented with his usual cheerfulness.

"Form up. Nothing takes us by surprise. Advance on my position."

They grouped up slightly more tightly as John moved forward, heading for the locator in his HUD. Cortana was strangely silent; he thought about talking to her, and in that moment of distraction, something tackled him.

Lazlakovic saw the attack and yelled to her IVs, who immediately looked for a second attacker even as they darted in; John was already recovering, his arms full of a snarling, snapping, biting creature. It seemed to be a flying ball of fur, vaguely dog-shaped, and it snapped at John's arms as he threw it off his chest and levered himself to his feet. He sighted along his gun at the creature as it charged again and was about to fire when he heard a sharp whistle.

The dog reacted instantly, turning tail and disappearing. John

frowned; that had been a human whistle. "To me," he barked over the radio. "We have something human ahead. Ten meters andâ€¦"

John stopped. Ahead, out of the dense foliage, someone stepped from the brush. He'd recognize the figure anywhere, even encased in armor, vines, and brush.

"John?" The voice was almost disbelieving as it came from the speakers.

"Kelly."

## 8. Catching Up Part 1

### \*\*Chapter 7: Catching Up Part 1\*\*

"Ripper didn't hurt you, did he?" Kelly cursed herself quietly. Her first human contact outside their close-knit group in almost three years, and she asked if her wolf had managed to hurt John? In full armor, no less.

John's head tilted slightly but he shook it, his voice almost sounding relieved as he answered. "No, Kelly, I'm fine. Are youâ€¦?" He seemed distracted. Kelly moved forward a hesitant step and beckoned for Ripper to come out of his bush; she stepped up to Kelly's heel as she had been taught, perfectly friendly now.

"No, we're all here. Wellâ€¦" Kelly could hear the sadness in her voice and fought to tamp it down; a professional soldier's etiquette required a reduction in emotional responses. "We lost Chief Mendez a year ago."

John nodded and cleared his throat unconsciously. "Where is everyone?"

"In the caveâ€¦" Kelly couldn't take it any longer and rushed forward, Ripper still hugging her heels as she threw herself onto John. "John, we thought no one was coming!" Her emotions were definitely out of whack; she wanted to cry in happiness and yell at him for not coming sooner. She settled for squeezing him, ignoring her own surprise when she realized she was hugging the air around him.

He dropped his gun, ignoring his training completely, and hugged her back fiercely; the Elite-like shields around his armor disappeared as though by a command and let her armor rasp against his as her grip tightened. "I've missed you," he murmured, his external speakers turned down so only she could hear it.

"Tell him to power down the Peliship for a while. I have to see who's alive and we need to get them out of here," John ordered over the speakers suddenly. He clearly had forgotten his external speakers and Kelly leaned back, surprised.

"What?" she asked.

John stepped back slightly. "We have some of our own surprises for you," he chuckled by way of explanation. Kelly tilted her head; this was a different John than she had grown up with.

The IVs came out silently from their hiding places as he said that; Kelly glanced at them all warily and the dog at her heel growled. "Kelly, this is Senior Chief Petty Officer Lazlakovic and her team, Petty Officers Carter, Basky, Landsmen, and Naomi." They each dipped their heads in greeting when he said their name. "They're Spartan IVs."

That seemed to shock Kelly; she rocked back on her heels slightly. "More Spartans?" she muttered, for his ears alone. "Where does ONI keep digging us up?"

"Sir." Lazlakovic strode forward, turning on her external speakers. "We need to move. N'hamee says large life forms are headed our way."

"Understood." John snapped back into command mode. "Kelly, take us to everyone else." Kelly snapped a sloppy salute "it had clearly been too long since she had made a proper one, though her muscle memory was good and she corrected it mid-swing" and turned.

"This way, sir," she said, starting into the brush. Ripper ranged out in front of them, clearly acting as scout. John wasn't sure what to make of the dog-like creature that seemed to dote on Kelly like a mother. It looked to be no more than two years old, if he compared it to the Chichi. This wolf-like dog was much more compact than the Newfie, however, and scarred "it was missing an ear."

They came to a cliff face and followed it to the west; they were almost to the entrance of what Kelly said was their cave when two strangers stepped from the bushes.

John observed the newcomers carefully; they fidgeted as Kelly spoke to them, a large "very large, John noted" snake dropped its head from the trees to rest on one's shoulder. Kelly reached up and stroked the snake's head in greeting.

"Tom, Lucy, this is Master Chief 117." They snapped salutes sloppily, unable to fix it in mid-salute like Kelly had. "John, Tom and Lucy, Spartan IIIs."

The young Spartan male strode forward a step, though John noted that he didn't let Lucy out of the corner of his eye. "It's an honor, sir," he said, his voice gravelly yet slightly higher than Kelly's. "Lucy and I are glad you're here."

"Who else is here?" John asked.

"Fred" that is, Lieutenant Frederic-104 and Linda-058." He peered curiously at the IVs who were behind John, scanning the terrain.

John grinned widely. Fred was a lieutenant? And he and Linda were alive!

"John?"

All the Spartans turned towards the cave's mouth, where a very old and frail-looking Dr. Halsey was standing, one hand on a use-smoothed cane that supported most of her leaning weight. Linda was standing

next to her, staring, her helmet off and her hair plastered to her scalp with water. A furry grey animal was latched onto her chest armor, which startled John for a moment before it moved onto her shoulder and sat there, peering with beady brown eyes at all of them. It had wicked-looking talons.

"Dr. Halsey." John breathed a sigh of relief. Of all of them, Dr. Halsey was the one he was most worried about since learning about the message. She was a civilian, not used to living in a hostile situation.

"You got our message?" She sounded unsure, quite unlike the Dr. Halsey he had known years ago.

"Yes, doctor." Cortana answered for him as he reassessed those standing before him. Dr. Halsey's eyes brightened at the sound of her voice coming from John's external speakers, though both Tom and Lucy jumped slightly.

Suddenly, behind Halsey, a figure floated into sight. John immediately brought up his gun; his IVs focused on the little ancilla that seemed his target without question.

"Wait, John, that's Keen Sacrifice â€" he brought us here," Dr. Halsey said quickly.

"He's a Forerunner ancilla," John said coldly, his voice icy as he glared at the machine.

"Hello," the ancilla said, addressing John but not moving. It looked kind of abused â€" several scratches across its booms said that something had gotten a hold of it. The IVs behind John were straining; the others were watching curiously.

"What was your primary mission?" John asked the ancilla.

"To guard the Shield World and any creatures that found their way into it."

"And you have nothing to do with the rings or the Ark?"

"Well, no. I was created not too long ago. My predecessor would have been able to tell you more, but we did not communicate, the Monitors and I."

"Then you might not have heard what happened to Lightbulb."

"An apt nickname," Keen Sacrifice murmured.

"I suppose you're here to keep an eye on them?" He nodded to the survivors over whom the ancilla hovered.

"Yes, of course."

"Yet you couldn't manage to boost their signal or even correspond with Cortana when we came out of Slipspace?"

"Protocols dictateâ€|"

"Protection of your primary subjects," Cortana snapped from John's

headset. He shifted backwards slightly, resting his weight on his heels to let her read the situation. "I read your code while you were chatting."

Dr. Halsey raised an eyebrow; she had tried to hack the ancilla's code several times, with his permission, to break the boredom of the past years. Yet Cortana had done it using only the system within John's armor?

"Howâ€¦" The ancilla tittered nervously. "Oh, \_you\_ read my code, did you? A human construct, a so-called "smart" AI? My code was written by the Forerunners themselves!"

"I upgraded," Cortana snarled. "And your attempts to hack this system are pathetic. Really? A double-generation matrix with encoded firebugs? You couldn't come up with anything better? You really are out of the loop, Keen Sacrifice. All human AIs now carry upgraded versions of your own coding. Improved by yours truly, of course."

Keen Sacrifice sputtered in angry denial. "The Forerunner code is the most advanced artificial intelligence coding to have been created."

"Not when you upgrade it with humanity's creativity and-"

"Cortana." John's voice brooked no argument; the AI subsided and was silent as John gave the ancilla a silent glare before speaking again. "Dr. Halsey, where did you find this one?"

"On the Dyson Sphere in Onyx," Dr. Halsey answered immediately. "He brought us from the Shield World and to this planet."

"Protocols say he couldn't bring them to an inhabited planet. But why way out here? There were suitable candidates nearer Earth, even along major trade routes," Cortana murmured into John's ear.

"Liar? Or Cole Protocol?" John asked silently, turning off his external speakers. He motioned for his IVs to stand down as he thought it over.

"Both?" Cortana hissed. "We know they're untrustworthy. Who knows how rampant this one is."

John nodded. "We can't risk it going rampant on our way to the Brute homeworld, or even in the middle of battle. Can you shut it down from here?"

"No," Cortana answered immediately. "I've been trying. I need a more powerful system."

John nodded to himself and turned on his external speakers. "Well, Keen Sacrifice, \_our\_ protocols don't allow Forerunner ancilla of unknown origins aboard UNSC ships â€" or those of our allies, either. So you're going to have to go back to your Shield World or find an Installation or something to monitor."

"John, he protected us," Dr. Halsey protested.

"And without Cortana's say-so, I can't let him onboard," the Master

Chief answered immediately. "We suspect something of Forerunner origin is working with the Brutes; he could be innocent, and he could be a spy. From my experience with them, there aren't lines they won't cross to follow their programming."

"Oh, this is silly," Dr. Halsey huffed. "\_I\_ clear him, alright?"

"Sorry, ma'am, but the UNSC doesn't recognize your authority for this kind of clearance anymore," John answered slowly.

Dr. Halsey frowned. Had three years destroyed her reputation that badly? In answer to her silent question, John said quietly, "Rumor got out about the Spartan IIs, our histories. When they found me—" He shrugged. "Some classified files went "missing" with ONI dumping so many people after the end of the war. Once they took me to court, it wasn't going to go away and the UNSC quietly declared you a wanted person of interest, though you were listed as MIA and presumed KIA." All of the survivors were now staring, wondering what the hell had happened in the three years they had been gone. "I'll explain in detail back onboard, but bottom line is, you'll probably be shipped immediately to a detention facility as soon as we rendezvous with Admiral Hood, or at least placed under guard until we can spare a ship to take you to Earth."

Fred, Linda, and Kelly stiffened at the unspoken threat. John shook his head as the IVs responded with tightened grips on their guns.

"So you're going to have to stay behind, Keen Sacrifice."

"Well, I— cannot let you take them without me. Protocols are strict—"

"Then I will put you down," John answered simply, flexing his fingers. "And Cortana will erase you line by line."

"No! I cannot let my subjects leave! I am their protector."

"John, he's fine. He's been with us for years," Dr. Halsey said.

John shook his head. "They go rampant very quickly, Dr. Halsey. Keen Sacrifice, if you will not release your "subjects," we will remove you from the equation. Your part in this has ended."

The ancilla's eye burned hotly, turning slowly from blue towards red. John didn't let him answer, jumping into action and diving as the ancilla fired its laser beam from the red eye. "Spartans, drop the ancilla," John barked over his radio. Kelly, Linda, and Fred froze, unsure of what to do, but his IVs jumped into action. Lazlakovic grabbed Basky's hand and he leapt for the ancilla, dragging it to the ground and pointing its eye uselessly into the dirt.

However, before John could move up to support the IV, Lucy intervened, grabbing the larger man by the shoulders and bodily throwing him across the clearing. Basky, unwary for a second attack, went limp and rolled with the impact, springing to his feet agilely.



"Stand down!" John barked. Lucy shook her head angrily, standing between the red-eyed ancilla and the Spartan II. "That's an order, Spartan." John slung his rifle â€" he wouldn't shoot a fellow soldier if he could help it - and advanced, his larger armor dwarfing the already-small Spartan III.

"Johnâ€¦" Dr. Halsey started. John shook his head, motioning for her â€" and his Spartan IVs â€" to stay out of the confrontation for now. He could sense Basky rejoining the IVs. Clearly, he would need to make his own authority over Lucy.

"Lucy, get out of the way," John ordered. He didn't want to chance fighting the smaller woman â€" Spartan or not, the MJOLNIR armor would pound her into a bloody pulp if he had to use force against her.

The woman shook her head again and the ancilla's eye glared at John angrily from over her right shoulder, though it didn't try to blast him with a laser.

"She doesn't speak," Dr. Halsey said softly to John.

Cortana appeared in John's HUD, frowning subtly. "She should have been medically dischargedâ€¦ Oh."

"What?" John asked, halting his advance and silencing his speakers.

"This says a Lt. Kurt Ambrose requested her reassignment â€" with Tom â€" to his positionâ€¦ On Onyx. It was a training ground for the generations of IIIs we managed to field. The L.T. is â€" was, he's presumed KIA on Onyx, as is everyone we're looking at here â€" Kurt-051."

John frowned and focused back on Lucy. "Spartan, you have your orders. Stand down."

Lucy merely shook her head again, her gaze darting towards the Spartan IVs, who hadn't moved.

As much as he disliked it, John knew what he had to do â€" and he gave the order with a twitch of his fingers. The Spartan IVs had been waiting for it and dove forward; Landsmen and Lazlakovic tackled Lucy, who rolled them away from the ancilla but left it unguarded. Carter and Naomi, anticipating his reaction, went for Tom, taking him to the dirt fairly easily and pinning him there. Basky and John went for the ancilla who, seeing its subjects under attack, fired its laser into John's chest.

The air heated; John's armor cooled itself, bathing his skin in an icy blast everywhere but his chest. The shield alarm started beeping as he reached forward, grabbing Keen Sacrifice's booms and yanking its eye downwards. Basky leapt on the ancilla and forced it into the dirt.

"No!"

John merely glanced over as the furious shout came from Lucy's lips, but he noted Dr. Halsey and the rest of the Spartan IIs staring at her like she had grown a third head.

"Chief, the snake is going to be a problem in a moment," Landsmen said calmly into John's ear. Basky was struggling to hold the ancilla still as it whirred, trying to lift itself and the heavy IV.

"Kelly, Linda, keep the snake from attacking anyone," John barked. "Cortana, prepare to jump." John knelt next to the Spartan IV holding the ancilla down. He couldn't take the time or attention to see if his IIs followed his orders; he focused solely on the Forerunner construct.

One gloved hand on either side of its eye, feeling the heat from its laser as it discharged uselessly into the ground, John felt Cortana leave his suit's system. The ancilla struggled for a few moments more, everyone watching tensely as the two men wrestled it into submission, careful to keep its laser down.

Its eye slowly cooled to its normal blue and Cortana's voice came out next. "I have control, John," she said calmly. "Let me up. This thing's self-destruct has a five-second countdown. I'll set it and jump back."

Basky backed up, releasing the ancilla's body. John held up one palm and its eye gently bumped against it in almost a high-five before moving slightly off. "It's wonderful to have a body I can direct again," Cortana sighed.

"Cortana, to business," John ordered. "Set the self-destruct and jump back." He grabbed the ancilla and folded his hand over its eye again. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Lucy struggling against her two captors; Tom was lying in the dirt calmly, though Naomi wasn't taking chances and was sitting on his back. Kelly and Linda were holding the snake's head, which was straining towards Lucy with some urgency.

Cortana flowed smoothly back into his suit through his glove and John released the ancilla's body. It immediately zipped far away and they heard a muffled explosion a few seconds later.

Lucy growled; John nodded and Landsmen and Lazlakovic released her, moving away as she stomped towards the snake. Naomi let Tom up as well; he joined his sister as she hugged the snake hard enough to worry him. Kelly and Linda left the pair with their snake.

"All safe?" John asked as he felt Cortana settle back into his suit, turning off his external speakers for a moment. Lazlakovic shook her head subtly, eyeballing the Spartan IIIs. John knew she was wondering if bringing them into a battle was a good idea " or even safe.

"Yes, but I really do miss having a body of my own," Cortana sighed in answer to his question. "Even the mobile holographic pedestal for the memorial and your trial" She sighed happily.

"We didn't bring one, so you're stuck with me," John told her.

"Well, we need to hurry up."

John nodded. Time was running out. "Call Fred in," he ordered Kelly,

turning already to Lazlakovic and ignoring the confused look from everyone but his IVs, who were well used to his lapses while talking to Cortana. "Lazlakovic, Carter, Basky, return to the LZ and secure it for our arrival." He shot a glance behind him at his Spartans, Dr. Halsey, and the IIIs, unsure of how they would take the news. "Landsmen, Naomi, help the doctor with any supplies she needs to carry out of here."

"Aye, sir!" They saluted smartly and went to their tasks. Kelly was already gone, Ripper with her.

"John, come here," Dr. Halsey called from the cave's mouth. She was sitting on the trunk obviously dragged there for the purpose; John obediently knelt beside her, glad to have an excuse not to face the IIIs while he tried to figure out how he would handle them. "Were any of your team stung by anything on the way in?" she asked softly.

"No, ma'am. We were careful."

"Good." She smiled faintly, resting her hand on John's new armor. He still had the shields down from when Kelly had hugged him. Linda came over and silently sat next to him, leaning slightly towards him. He took the silent request and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, carefully avoiding the thick-taloned grey creature which walked across Linda's shoulders and onto his.

"We found you," he said quietly. "We really found you."

Dr. Halsey smiled, eyes almost tearing up. "We had almost given up," she confessed. "After losing Mendezâ€¦" A shadow haunted her eyes. Linda looked down; Tom and Lucy, John noted out of the corner of his eye, trembled visibly.

"What happened?"

"There is too much to tell now," Dr. Halsey said tiredly.

"We'll debrief you on the ship," he said quickly. "Butâ€¦ You need to know what's been going on. You disappeared in 2552. It's currently late September in 2555. We are launching an attack on the Brute homeworld and detoured to pick you up after we heard your signal." John paused. "The war is over," he said quietly.

Linda, Tom, and Lucy reacted quicker than Dr. Halsey, freezing. John felt Linda start to shiver but she repressed it with an iron will. They clearly thought something had happened to Earth, dooming humanity.

"What's important for now is that we have an alliance with the Sangheili," he added quickly.

Dumbstruck silence met his claim; he noted Fred and Kelly approaching at top speed and stood, pulling Linda and Dr. Halsey up with him easily. The grey fuzzball on his shoulder jumped onto Linda's armor and hung onto her back.

"Did I hear that right?" Kelly demanded, marching up to John before he had a chance to greet Fred. It would be awkward; John's authority exceeded his FOF tag rating MCPON, but technically Fred still

outranked him. "We have an alliance with the Elites?"

John nodded. "Thel â€" the Arbiter â€" led a defection from the Covenant after he discovered what the Halo rings really did. We-

"We?" Kelly hissed. "John, the Elites are Covenant! They're the enemy. You just burned Keen because he was Forerunner. Now we're besties with Covenant?"

"Kelly, Thel and his Sangheili and Unggoy are here to help. We almost lost Earth. We'd've been overrun by the Flood fleet without him. Thel saved my life. They saved humanity."

"After killing trillions of us," Linda remarked softly.

John nodded. "True. And they are trying to repair the damage. But we have a big problem â€" something or someone is leading the Brutes, and they're gunning for humanity."

"The Master Chief managed to stop them from slaughtering everyone at the peace talks," Naomi interjected as he exited the cave, arms full of battered crates clearly stuffed with supplies. "But it was a close thing."

John shrugged. He didn't like talking about that fight; it was the closest he had come to permanent death. He especially didn't like thinking about the weeks spent in the hospital with Rebecca at his bedside.

Dr. Halsey frowned carefully. "That would explain your armor's upgrades," she said softly. "I can't tell what some of the components do, but they clearly are more advanced than the Mark IVs."

John nodded, reactivating his shield with a pop. "We can discuss all this onboard, but we need to get airborne. Admiral Hood said not to fall behind."

Dr. Halsey nodded. Linda gently lifted the doctor â€" it was clear she couldn't manage to walk much anymore, especially through the thick jungle.

"What about Prince?" Tom asked quietly, looking to Dr. Halsey.

"Bring him," Dr. Halsey said. John watched curiously as Tom gave a command to the snake's head still hanging on Lucy's shoulder. Kelly and Fred stepped forward as the large snake untangled itself. What John had taken for a thick vine was actually the snake's body, nearly as thick around as his torso. The thing was easily twenty feet long and weighed more than a fully armored Spartan. He didn't like to think how close a contest it would be if it decided to attack him or his crew.

"Naomi, Landsmen, flanking guard on Linda and Dr. Halsey," he ordered. "I'll take point." He headed out almost immediately, eager to return to the ship and leave. They had the Brutes to find, after all.

It felt great to hear Kelly's soft footstep behind him, Fred's just

behind her. They were carrying the super-heavy snake, but it was clear that they wouldn't leave the animal behind. The tiny bird perched on Fred's helmet was also clearly a companion. The emotional ties between Spartan and pet were clearly too deep to sever easily, and John figured they had earned it.

Lazlakovic, Carter, and Basky met the group at the outskirts of the clearing where the Peliship waited, and they eyeballed the snake with silence. The Spartan IIs and IIIs stared at the human-Elite hybrid ship.

John told his team to make sure to watch in case anyone attempted to attack N'hamee and then walked over to the second Pelican, thumping twice on the hatch. It lowered immediately and N'hamee was hard on its heels, ignoring their guests for a moment to approach John.

The Spartan was careful not to show any hesitance as they clasped forearms, more for Kelly, Fred, Linda, Tom, and Lucy's benefit than for anything else. "Careful," John murmured through his speakers. "They're still unsure about this."

N'hamee nodded, deep voice rumbling in response. "They have not tried to attack yet," he chuckled softly. John nodded stiffly; he could almost \_feel\_ Kelly's eyes burning a hole through his armor.

They marched over to the assembled group. The Elite made sure to keep his posture open, standing proudly but keeping his hands open and relaxed.

"N'hamee, these are the survivors. Dr. Catherine Halsey." She dipped her head slightly in greeting at her name, obviously trying not to stare too hard at the short Elite â€" his head barely cleared John's visor.

"You are responsible for the Spartan II program," N'hamee said carefully. Dr. Halsey nodded, apparently intrigued that the Sangheili was speaking English. Or perhaps that he knew the information. "We are grateful to you for it, then." This certainly made her confused. N'hamee smiled â€" and all of the Spartans who weren't IVs or John tensed at the motion.

"It's just a smile," John said quickly, before Kelly could drop her armful of snake and attack.

"My apologies," the Elite said hard on John's heels. "I am used to dealing mostly with those who have spent time around my kind," he explained, holding both hands out in a peaceful gesture.

The newcomers relaxed, barely. They were tightly wound.

"As I was saying," John said quietly. "Lieutenant Fred-104, Petty Officers Kelly-087 and Linda-058, Spartan IIs. Petty Officers Lucy and Tom are Spartan IIIs."

They each dipped their heads. N'hamee looked curiously at Tom and Lucy. "Spartan IIIs â€" which company are you?"

"Beta," Tom answered curtly.

The Elite nodded. "Your team destroyed a Covenant refinery on a moon

you call Pegasi Delta, yes?"

Tom said nothing, face stony, but Lucy frowned and closed her eyes in a slow blink.

John raised an eyebrow. A Covenant refinery was a hefty target. He filled in the awkward silence quickly. "We should be getting aboard, N'hamee," he said, purposefully addressing the Elite by his name to clarify the power dynamics for his confused Spartans.

"Yes, sir," N'hamee said easily, causing Kelly to shift slightly. "I will prepare the crew to receive everyone." He glanced pointedly at the snake.

"Arrange for a private room for Dr. Halsey. Tell L'eto and N'kane to prep the med bay to receive injured." He hadn't missed Kelly's missing pinky finger. "Tell them to keep scarce for a while," he added on a private comm channel to N'hamee's headset. "Get a separate room for my Spartans and the IIIs. They'll still in shock but they might attack an Elite if startled in the hallway."

Lazlakovic, who had listened in, and N'hamee both saluted and John dismissed them to board the ship and relay his orders, turning to Basky and Carter instead. "Help get the snake stowed," he ordered the pair. They led Fred, Kelly, Tom, and Lucy into the Peliship, where John could hear them cursing on their private comm as they tried to arrange the large reptile on top of the supply crates. It took up almost all the room in the ship's hatch; he motioned for Tom and Lucy to stay with Basky and Carter in the Peliship and for them to head for the ship. N'hamee flew off quickly, leaving Landsmen, Linda, Dr. Halsey, John, and Naomi at the edge of the clearing for the pilot to return.

"We'll take the next one up, Doctor," he told Dr. Halsey, who nodded.

"What's been going on since we disappeared?" she asked. They had time now, and she wanted to hear the story.

John frowned slightly. "You went missing in November of 2552. Since then, we've had a lot of developments."

"I can tell," she said, motioning for Linda to set her down on a stump. John signaled for Landsmen and Naomi to guard the perimeter with Fred and Kelly; Linda moved off to join them. He knew they would all be able to hear, however, as he crouched next to the doctor.

"Once Onyx fell, the Covenant just kept coming," he said softly. "We found another ring â€" Installation 05, on November 2nd. I killed the Prophet of Regret." Dr. Halsey raised an eyebrow. "Cortana and I were captured by Gravemind â€" you could call him the Flood's leader, but he was also a repository for all their collective knowledge." John repressed a shiver at the memory.

"Sesa 'Refumme found out what the rings really did and started the Great Schism, with the Loyalists and Separatists. I guess his word didn't travel fast enough â€" they glassed Onyx before the Arbiter could spread the truth. Tartarus, a Brute, took the Index off of High Charity, which the Gravemind sent me and Thel to find. That was the

first time we worked together." He chuckled softly. "When I failed to stop Tartarus, I hitched a ride on the Forerunner's Dreadnought carrying the High Prophet of Truth to Earth, and left Cortana on Installation 05 to destroy it, if necessary. The Dreadnought brought us to the Sol system and we fought on Mars and then Earth. I fell into the atmosphere and landed in East Africa."

Dr. Halsey frowned. "How did you survive?"

"I used a hatch from the Dreadnought as a heat shield and passed out," John answered with a slight smile. "The UNSC accepted help from the Covenant Separatists and we cleared out the Loyalists and Flood. We stormed the Ark to destroy the Gravemind and get Cortana back."

"Like a white knight in shining armor," Cortana chimed in through his speakers.

"We destroyed Truth's fleet with the help of the Flood and Gravemind." Dr. Halsey frowned. "I know," he assured her. "Gravemind didn't want to be destroyed any more than I wanted the rings firing. We came to an understanding."

"We barely escaped the Ark. We were on the Forward Unto Dawn when the Slipspace bubble burst, I guess, and sheared the ship in half. I was in the back half and thrown out into normal space, floating in the middle of nowhere with almost no systems except Cortana. Thel was in the front and crashed into the Indian Ocean. Cortana sent me into cryo and she broadcast emergency signals from the ship."

"Thel found me in 2554, and I retired in August." He almost could imagine the Spartans all turning in amazement and he coughed slightly. "There was nothing more for me to do, really. They had the IVs." He motioned to the Spartans who had accompanied him to the planet. "I didn't have the training to be a trainer â€" though my DT troops are the exception â€" and couldn't do a desk job. I was called back in May 2555, as security for peace talks with the Brutes on Treaty." He didn't call it "Sacrifice," though Hood had named the planet for his supposed heroics in defeating the War Chieftain.

"Are you going to ignore your year with Rebecca?" Cortana demanded in his ear, thankfully not over his external speakers.

He shut his speakers off and frowned slightly. "It's not pursuant to what happened while they've been gone," he answered finally.

"You'll have to tell her sometime."

"Maybe."

Cortana huffed and John reactivated his speakers. Dr. Halsey had noticed his silence but didn't question it.

"We arrived in mid-May and the peace talks dissolved almost immediately."

"Meaning that John inadvertently challenged the War Chieftain and they fought to the death. Since John is clearly not dead â€" anymore â€" he obviously won, which means he is technically leader of the Brutes. They didn't like that and he managed to start a civil war

while we were putting him back together," Cortana interjected, running away with the tale before John could recall her.

"We came back to Earth and I recovered, and then we shipped off to the Brute's homeworld. Eight days ago, a Sangheili mining ship recovered your signal while searching nearby systems for mining planets to rebuild our fleets with. Admiral Hood and Thel 'Vadam" the Arbiter" agreed that sending a fast ship to retrieve whatever we could find would improve our chances against the Brutes."

Dr. Halsey frowned thoughtfully; John sat silently, letting her absorb the information.

Above, John heard the familiar whine of a Peliship coming in to land. N'hamee was the only one on board when the hatch hissed open.

"Alright, into the Peliship," he ordered, gently picking up Dr. Halsey to transport her inside himself. They piled in quickly; Linda held her koala thing in her lap as they took off.

"What happened during your retirement?" Linda asked curiously. There was an underlying question of how he had retired, but John chose to ignore it.

"I lived quietly in a house in the mountains," he answered.

"He also-"

John shut off the external speakers before Cortana could continue. Linda waited patiently as John addressed Cortana in the privacy of his helmet. "Cortana, it's unimportant."

"Bullshit," she said angrily. "John, Rebecca drew you from your shell. You've changed" and your Spartans aren't sure why. They'll figure it out eventually. If not from you, from one of your troops who was on Earth when the whole camera-smashing fiasco went down."

John growled, shifting. "Alright, but I tell them," he finally relented. He turned his external speakers back on and met Dr. Halsey's eyes through his visor. "I wasn't suited to civilian life," he said calmly, as though he hadn't just shut Cortana off and spoken to her privately. "I met a woman" Rebecca" who helped me adjust. But I managed to live in secrecy only for a while before someone figured out my identity and came looking for me. I" Broke a camera," he admitted.

"You broke a camera?" Dr. Halsey repeated, befuddled. Landsmen and Naomi snickered.

John nodded. "And got taken to court for property damage and harassing the news reporters. Rebecca and I were hounded from then on, until I left for the peace talks."

"And where is this Rebecca?" Dr. Halsey asked softly.

"Back on her farm on Earth," John said carefully.

Linda and Dr. Halsey were silent, clearly digesting this new



information " not only that John had retired, but that he had clearly adjusted at least somewhat.

Ahead, the pilot called from the cockpit, "Sir, we're approaching the ship. There's been a situation."

## 9. Catching Up Part 2

### \*\*Chapter 8: Catching Up Part 2\*\*

John frowned and strode to the cockpit. "What is the situation?" he asked.

"It seems the snake won't go out of the bay." N'hamee sounded bewildered.

"Prince is likely picking up on Tom and Lucy's fear," Dr. Halsey called forward to John. "They aren't used to ships, and to be honest, until recently, we were mostly expecting never to be found, or to be found by Covenant. We'll get him moved when we get there."

"I told them to clear the dock," John muttered, accessing the ship's comms. It was calm; apparently the snake hadn't swallowed anyone, at least.

"Lazlakovic," John barked into his radio, waiting for his second to come back.

"Yes, sir?" The Spartan sounded annoyed.

"Clear the bay."

"Understood, sir." Lazlakovic cut the radio with a burst of static and John turned back to the Peliship's occupants.

"We'll be inside in a few moments. They're lowering the shields now."

"This is so weird," Linda muttered, resealing her helmet. "I never expected to be flying a Pelican \_into\_ a Covenant ship without plans to blow it up."

"Please don't," John said seriously. He turned around. "You're going to see Elites here and even more when we rejoin the fleet " they prefer "Sangheili" " and you're going to fight next to them. You'll train with them the same way I've been training my troops and the Spartan IVs so we can hit fast and hard. Brutes are bigger and stronger than us; we team up one Sangheili troop with one human squad. They're learning to mingle both on and off the 'battle field.' You're going to have to do the same. I can't have you shooting my troops."

"You lead them?" Dr. Halsey asked.

"Thel and I are equal in authority. When we find the Brutes, we'll both lead " I with half the ship, he with the other half and control over all Elites on the ground and in the ships. I have several human officers on other Sangheili ships, chosen for their

ability to command Sangheili without prejudices. Admiral Hood has several ships with him, filled with human troops as well."

"Sir, they're lowering the shields," the pilot interrupted. "We're in bay two. The snake's next door in one." They smoothly glided into position and parked; N'hamee lowered the hatch and the five Spartans filed out. Dr. Halsey refused to be carried and walked into the softly-glowing ship, looking around in awe.

Lazlakovic trotted up and saluted the Chief. "Sir!" Chief nodded and looked down at his second. "We've got quarters arranged for Dr. Halsey and the Spartans â€" one for the IIs, and there's room for you if you'd like to move, and one for the IIIs."

"Thank you," the Spartan II said, nodding towards the hallway. "We'll follow as soon as we get the snake moving. How's that going?"

"He's all anyone's been talking about," she said as he followed the Chief as they went to the first spot. N'hamee slipped out through a maintenance hatch towards the bridge, probably to prepare their Slipspace jump. "I think it'll go smooth. They calmed him down and got him to spit it out."

"It?" John asked, turning slightly.

"Oh, it swallowed a ration pack from the crate of supplies. Not harmful. He's beautiful, by the way."

"Are you volunteering to help transport him?"

Lazlakovic laughed. "If I could lift part of that, sir, I'd take you up on it." John chuckled softly. "But I think those IIIs have it covered. Poor kids."

"Are they okay?" John asked.

"Yeah," she sighed. "Caught a glimpse of the engineer on his way to the bridge. Started shakin' like leaves. We got 'em settled down a bit."

"Thanks."

Behind him, Fred, Kelly, and Linda shared a glance, which Dr. Halsey and the Chief both picked up on. John knew immediately how much he had changed in their eyes â€" here he was talking to his second in command like he was a marine Chief.

"Fred, Linda, Kelly, how do we deal with this snake?" he asked his teammates behind him.

"He just needs Tom and Lucy at his side always," Kelly answered. Ripper yipped from where she was carrying him in her arms. Fred's bird was still on his shoulder and Linda's koala hanging onto her chest armor like a furry tumor. John wasn't comfortable with those razor-sharp talons so close to his teammate's heart.

"What's with the zoo?" Carer asked before John could cut him off.

Kelly looked down at the Spartan IV. She gave him a casual salute and

looked back up, ignoring the question. It was nothing insulting â€" she simply wasn't used to answering questions like that, and figured it was irrelevant.

Carter glanced up at the Chief and frowned slightly; John shook his head silently, warning him away from further questions.

They arrived at the first bay to find Tom and Lucy sitting with Prince's first three feet across their laps, petting him soothingly. John got the feeling that they were taking much more comfort from the snake than giving.

"Alright, Tom, Lucy," he said, touching Lucy's shoulder. She flinched slightly and stood quickly, Prince's head following her. While she didn't glare at him, John could feel the anger she had towards him â€" probably for killing the ancila.

The Chief stepped back to give them their space. "Let's get Prince into your quarters," he suggested.

"Thank you, sir," Tom said quietly, standing. "He can slither along if we clear the hallways a bitâ€"|" He glanced around at the purple surrounding them.

"Alright." John turned to Landsmen. "Clear the hallways towards the room for Tom and Lucy. I don't want to scare the snake." They would already be clear, but the IV was grateful for the excuse to leave and saluted smartly.

"No, sir," the Spartan IV agreed with a chuckle. "He looks like he could swallow you, armor and all, sir."

"Don't bet on it," Naomi yelled as he ran up. "My ears are burnin', Chief. You called?"

John grinned slightly behind his visor â€" he had been thinking about who to send to the bridge to get them on their way, since he wasn't comfortable leaving the Spartan guests quite yet.

"Get to the bridge and tell N'hamee to take us back to the fleet. Prince will slither in. And make sure to ask everyone to keep out of the showers for another hour." Naomi saluted and darted off quickly.

"Alright, head on out. Tom, Lucy, Lazlakovic will lead you and Prince to your assigned quarters." John knew the two were clearly a little rattled and let them start on the trip before turning to Fred, Kelly, Linda, and Dr. Halsey. "Would you prefer a shower, food, or your bunks first?" he asked, unlatching his helmet with a hiss of air. He tucked it under one arm as he waited for his answer.

Dr. Halsey peered at him curiously, then smiled faintly. "You've certainly changed, John. I'd like a shower first. Fred? Kelly? Linda?"

"Shower sounds good for all of us," Fred said. He unsealed his helmet, following John's example but clearly not very happy about it. He was tense â€" and his scruffy beard didn't make him look any better.

"I'll show you the way," John said. He motioned for Carter, who had been discretely hanging around. "Carter, dig through the supplies and find some fatigues, then find something for Dr. Halsey as well."

"Sure thing, sir. I'll get the cleaner set up, too." John nodded and motioned for his three siblings and Dr. Halsey to follow him. He set a slow pace, knowing Dr. Halsey couldn't keep up with anything faster.

"So, John, you lead a troop here?" Fred asked. John nodded and frowned slightly.

"When the war finally ended, we were out of pretty much every officer on the force. Many got promoted too early. Admiral Hood and his team are working on demoting those who can't handle the duty." He glanced back. "Your FOF says Lieutenant."

Fred nodded. "Just before we lost Kurtâ€¦ He gave me the promotion."

"And I will update our logs to reflect it and confirm you in the position tomorrow. The integration of our military with some Sangheili elements, especially here and on the Blade and her sister hybrid ships, and the small amount of soldiers left on both sides means that the authority system has had someâ€¦ changesâ€¦ since you left."

"Your FOF says MCPON."

"Awarded after I was assumed dead," John answered. "Admiral Hood confirmed it when I was found. Here, however, I am in charge of every human on this ship as well as all Minors enrolled on the Double Trouble troops, which includes you three, the Spartan IIIs and IVs, and you, Dr. Halsey."

"You'll have no fight about that with me, sir," Fred said quickly.

"What am I going to do here?" Dr. Halsey asked curiously.

"Well, ma'am, after your shower I'd like you to report to the medic bay. This ship is not outfitted for human trauma but our engineer has made a study of our anatomy and would surely appreciate your knowledge on the subject. And Cortana will want to compare notes."

"Speaking of," Cortana said quietly into his ear, "I'm going to go back to the bridge. I pulled some interesting data from Keen Sacrifice I want to look at."

John nodded quietly and stopped in front of one of the terminals, putting his hand on it so Cortana could jump from his suit into the ship. "I'll drop off your chip when I get to the bridge," he said over his external speakers.

"Thanks, John. Dr. Halsey, I'll see you when you're ready to compare notes," Cortana said from the terminal's tiny speakers.

"She jumped through your glove?" Dr. Halsey asked, seizing John's

glove with some of her old fire in her eyes.

"We installed the necessary hardware in my gloves so I can touch something mechanical and let Cortana jump into it â€" if it has a large enough storage system. Another Forerunner upgrade." He shut his shields down as he thought of it, touching the appropriate button on the chin plate in his helmet with one finger.

"What other improvements have been made?" Dr. Halsey asked, unfazed by holding the glove by the air around it until the shields had disappeared.

"Stealth cloaking," John answered quickly. "I can withstand up to four direct plasma hits before my shield drains, or a direct hit from a Hunter's cannon."

"Where are the Hunters and Grunts and Jackals?" Kelly asked as they headed once more for the showers.

"The Mgalekgolo â€" the Hunters â€" are trying to decide what to do on Te, their homeworld. The Sangheili diplomats are confident that they will join us. The Grunts are signed onto our side; they want protection, methane, and food. In return, they'll fight beside us."

"You mean as cannon fodder?" Kelly demanded.

"No, as full Privates. They don't have the brainpower to rise above that station, but each squad will be confirmed once we get around to it. All of the Grunts in this war party are on other ships from the one I've been on; they are too unruly for anyone but the Sangheili Majors to control. We didn't realize how close they were to extinction."

"And the Jackals?"

"They're staying out of it," John answered. "Said they will supply weapons to both sides and we told them we'll be hunting them down as pirates if they keep going after merchant ships trying to salvage glassed worlds."

"What about the Engineers and Prophets?" Linda asked quietly.

"We haven't seen a Prophet after our assassinations. They're either behind the Brutes â€" though I doubt it; they don't dabble in genetic manipulation that we know of â€" or wiped out. I hope it is the former, because otherwise, we have a powerful enemy and no idea what it is or what they're capable of."

"Genetic manipulation?" Dr. Halsey asked with a frown.

A faintly uncomfortable expression crossed John's face as he turned down a hallway. "Someone â€" or something â€" managed to genetically enhance a Brute and making them to the average Brute what the Spartan IIs are to the average human." Kelly, Fred, and Linda winced involuntarily. "I fought off one on Treaty, during the "peace talks" after I apparently challenged him for control of the Brute nations." John's voice was bland, a tone Dr. Halsey didn't hear from him often. "He managed to break most of the bones in my body before I put him down. I wasn't out of the hospital for weeks after they practically

recloned every organ in my body."

"You were wearing your armor?" Linda asked softly.

John glanced back and nodded. "It was pretty much scrap once we were done. But a good thing did happen because of it â€" I got upgrades to most of my skeletal structure, so I'm a little more indestructible."

"What's the story with the Spartan IVs?" Kelly asked.

John tilted his head. "They volunteered as adults. Miranda â€" that is, Senior Chief Lazlakovic â€" and her crew were Helljumpers before signing up. They had no more Spartan IIs, and no one had heard from any of the IIIs after Onyx fell, so ONI decided they needed a new generation."

"What are their stats?"

"They're almost as strong as we are," John said. "Not as fast, both because they weren't raised in the lifestyle, but they've got experience. Their armor is a lesser version of yours, though they do have rudimentary shielding now."

John turned the last corner and opened the door into the showers. "Here we are. The best part is that these showers are all tall enough to stand under without hunching."

"They would have to be, to fit squid-heads," Kelly said, walking into the silent room.

"Kelly," John said immediately. "We don't call our allies squid-heads, or split-chins, or alligator-faces. They are either Private, sir, or Sangheili. The ones in red armor outrank you; the ones in green or blue are Private status. Got it?"

"Yes, sir." Kelly saluted smartly, only a small hint of sarcasm in her voice.

"Good. That goes for the rest of you, too. We just got the fights to stop and we don't need them rekindled. Dr. Halsey, you can get started â€" your clothing should be here soon. Lazlakovic is bringing the equipment to take off your armor," John said to his three Spartans.

They shrugged and began stripping their armor. "We've not had the luxury of a technician team for three years," Fred said as he set his helmet on the long bench at chest-height. "We can do it ourselves."

John nodded and waited. He wasn't going to leave his troops to wander a Sangheili ship without direction.

They were all filthy and thin, he noted. Not that they were wasted, but he could see the lack of grace in their movements as they quickly stripped. Ripper sat calmly where Kelly told him to, watching the scene with intelligent eyes. The koala gripped Ripper's fur in one hand when Linda set him down next to the dog-like creature, while the little bird perched on the koala's head.

"What are they?" John asked, now that no one was watching. Kelly shrugged.

"We don't really know. Nothing was named on the planet. Ripper's a wolf, or that's what we called them. Fred's bird is a good scout, his name is Hoody for his crown. Linda's koala thing is actually an herbivore; his name is Grey Eyes. The snake is Prince; he had a sister, but she was killed by a dragon that attacked us a year back."

"You said something about a creature killing Chief Mendez?" John asked quietly.

Kelly nodded, frowning slightly as she sat to pull off her mud-covered boots. Their skin was unnaturally pale, as though they hadn't seen sunlight in far too long, yet from what John understood, the planet's rotation ensured it was almost constantly light outside.

"It followed us after Fred killed its baby," she answered. "We finally had to take it out. We lost Duchess, High Pitched â€" Fred's first bird â€" and Chief Mendez. We buried him on a hill nearby."

"I'll update his record accordingly," John said softly. He watched his siblings critically as they moved; they were stiff, their movements constrained either by choice or habit. Kelly was slower than her usual.

\_A few good nights of rest and days of training and they'll be back to normal,\_ John told himself. They all stepped into the showers; he smiled slightly at the blissful expressions on all their faces. They hadn't shaved in a long time; John opened the locker on the side of the wall where the humans kept some communal supplies and handed everyone a bottle of body wash, shampoo, and razors. He would also have to get their hair cut â€" it was longer than military code dictated, and uneven.

Carter came in with his arms full of clothing, which he neatly folded into piles as the Spartans finished their showers. They had lingered slightly, but John didn't reprimand them for it. They deserved to get completely clean. Dr. Halsey took the longest, but her longer hair took more time to wash and she wasn't used to thirty-second showers.

Kelly, Fred, and Linda clearly wanted to get back in their armor, but judging by its condition, it seriously needed cleaning. He doubted they had taken it off as much as recommended during their years on the hostile planet.

"We've got the cleaning station set up in their room," Carter told John as he tried to keep from staring at the Spartan IIs as they dressed.

"Good," John answered. "Ask Naomi to escort Tom and Lucy down here," he said. Naomi was the most approachable and friendly of the Spartan IVs; though not a mother, she was certainly the best suited to maternal care.

"Yes, sir." Carter darted out of the room as Kelly, Fred, and Linda

lined up in parade rest for inspection. John cast a critical eye over them " their uniforms were tight, unfortunately so, but crisp and clean, and they each were moving more smoothly.

Dr. Halsey picked up her cane again. "I'm ready for a nap," she announced with a self-indulgent chuckle.

"I will show you to your rooms," John said quickly. "And have something to eat brought up from the supplies."

"And we'll catch up," Kelly said softly, leaning over to pick up her armor.

John nodded as the Spartans packed up their armor into neat bundles and then followed him out; Dr. Halsey followed them and the three animals trailed at their owners' heels.

The intercom buzzed to life just as the group approached the rooms assigned to the Spartan IIs and Dr. Halsey. "We are clear for Slipspace," N'hamee announced over the system. "Jumping in five" four" three" two" one."

The ship smoothly accelerated; Dr. Halsey braced herself against the wall and her cane, though Linda also turned slightly to grip her forearm and ensure the older woman wouldn't fall. John pushed the access code for the first room.

"Here you are, Dr. Halsey," he said softly, stepping back. The doctor went inside and looked around " the bed was simple but soft, a purple glowing gel that the Sangheili used on their ships' bunks. She put her dirty clothing down on the small dresser and went to the bed; the door hissed closed as John stepped across the hall and opened another room.

"These three are for you," he told Kelly, Fred, and Linda, waving to the three rooms on the right side of the hallway. "The IVs and I are along the next hallway; L'eto and N'kane " our medic and engineer " are in that hallway as well."

"Very cozy," Kelly noted, stepping into the room just opposite the doctor. Fred took the one on Kelly's left; Linda went for the last one down. They arranged their armor on their floor and bed, for lack of better space.

Carter and Landsmen appeared just as John was about to call for them, pushing the armor cleaning equipment in a cart they had taken from the supplies. Behind them, Naomi carried an armful of MREs. They put all the equipment in Kelly's room; Fred and Linda helped her clean her armor, repairing most of the seals as they went, and took bites out of the MREs as they worked.

Loathe as he was to leave his siblings, John knew he had to report to the bridge at least summarily; he was, after all, technically the captain. With a quiet nod to Carter and Naomi to ask them to stand by, he left; he felt Kelly's eyes following him even after the door between them hissed shut.

\_~~Kelly's POV~~\_

Kelly frowned slightly, scrubbing at a patch of dirt and mud chinked



up in the joint of her armor's elbow section. The two Spartan IVs were out in the hallway, standing at rigid attention.

Using the pick tool, Kelly managed to dig out a small pebble and let it roll onto the floor; they'd sweep later. Fred and Linda silently worked on her armor as well, digging mud from the joints and then using the spare seals in the kit to replace those that had blown â€" which was nearly all of them â€" and buffing what they could of the scratches out of the armor.

"Soâ€¦ We're in an Elite ship." Fred started the conversation quietly, but the female Spartan IIs still jumped a bit at the sudden sound of his gravelly voice. Kelly hacked at a strip of vine she had tied onto the armor as camouflage.

"And we can't blow it up," Kelly reminded him with a slight snort.

Fred shook his head. "You know, once you get over the alien-ness, it's a very nice ship."

Linda nodded quietly, her voice soft as she opined, "I don't like the purple color, but we've been on the wrong end of these stealth ships before."

"And now it seems we're in an alliance with the Elites," Fred murmured. "In just three years, we went from being mortal enemies and getting wiped out to being best buddies."

"John certainly thinks so," Kelly huffed. She wasn't willing to call any squid-head a friend, not after the millions murdered by them.

"He's had time to adjust," Linda reminded them. "We'll have to do the same. We can't be picking fights with Elites. We're so out of shape they'd pick us off like flies."

"Don't count on it," Kelly growled, buffing at a scratch on her forearm's armor.

"I want an armor upgrade," Fred said, changing the subject quickly. "Did you see the IV's shields? Not to mention John's Mark â€" what, VII?"

Kelly shrugged; she didn't know what classification of armor they were calling John's obvious upgrades. "He's faster. Probably faster than I am now." She had always been the fastest Spartan â€" to be demoted was a slightly painful blow to her pride.

"Neural enhancements," Linda said quietly. "Maybe we'll all get them."

"If we have time," Fred reminded the group. "John gave the impression that we're going right into battle."

"Just how I like it," Kelly grunted, wiping her piece of armor one last time and stacking it in the \_clean\_ pile. She grabbed a boot â€" the messiest pieces â€" and went to work on the sole. "But Brutes are tough. Unaugmented humans won't stand a chance."

"Especially if we run into any augmented Brutes," Fred added. "I've never seen John scared before, but when he talked about itâ€¦ There was something there."

"Imagine you're a little stick human facing one of us," Kelly told him severely. "Of course John's nervous about them. Hell, I'm nervous about meeting one. But hopefully the process isn't replicable. Like our augmentations. Maybe they â€" whoever they are â€" started with one to see how it went."

"Pairing humans with Elites should help, though," Linda said quietly, placing Kelly's helmet â€" visor newly replaced â€" in the pile of cleaned items. "Especially if we have some of those gold-armored ones."

"Most human troops are more used to shooting Elites than working with them, I'd think," she continued after a moment of quiet. "But John said he was leading a mixed group."

"Including those IVs," Kelly added. "They'reâ€¦ interesting."

"They've accepted his leadership just like we did," Fred said. "It's clear they trust him."

"They act like Marines," Kelly protested. "No discipline."

"They seemed pretty well disciplined when they attacked Keen and Lucy," Fred answered, frowning slightly. "What was with that, anyway? Forerunners are now enemies?"

"Apparently." Linda shrugged. "John did have a point. Why didn't he boost our signal? Or at least contact Cortana when they got into range of our radio?"

"Not to mention, why didn't we hear them? John must have sent out a broadcast." Kelly frowned, clunking the boot on the floor to loosen the dirt caked into the ankle joint. "It's standard search-and-rescue."

"Could Keen have been blocking it?" Fred wondered aloud. "I wouldn't think soâ€¦ He wasn't exactly helpful, but he did get us out of the Dyson Sphere."

"I have to wonder if we wouldn't have been better off inside it," Kelly said quietly. "We wouldn't have lost Mendez. Maybe they'd've picked up our signal faster."

"Maybe," Linda agreed.

Kelly was about to continue when the door hissed open. All three faced the threat immediately, tensing â€" though they relaxed when they recognized John in his MJOLNIR standing in the doorway.

"Would you care for some help?" he asked softly, standing on the threshold of the doorway with his hands folded neatly behind his back, his helmet on. Kelly shrugged and scooted over in a silent invitation. The silence was slightly awkward as their brother sat down to complete the circle, removing his helmet and setting it beside himself before picking up Kelly's shoulder piece and selecting

a small pick from the cart.

They worked in silence for a moment as the three Spartan IIs caught their thoughts, the only sounds filling the room coming from the scraping of metal picks over the armor and occasional huffs of breath to blow dust from tiny crevices.

"You have a lot of story to tell," Kelly said, a slight accusation in her voice. John nodded, smiling slightly "all three Spartans saw the fresh scars littering his face from the past three years, most recently ones from repairing the damage inflicted by the augmented Brute.

"Well, where to begin," he said softly, untangling a piece of camouflage vine from the shoulder piece he was working on. "I suppose I should start with what happened after we lost Onyx " unless you had access to information from the outside world?" Fred shook his head in the negative. John nodded and began the history lesson, recalling times and places he thought he had forgotten as he explained every battle and nuance in the war " and the more recent alliance.

## 10. Schoolyard Antics

### \*\*Chapter 9: Schoolyard Antics\*\*

"So Thel gave me the Veracity and Admiral Hood gave me leave to pick a crew and we came to find you," John finished, setting Linda's newly-refurbished helmet into her pile. They had finished Kelly's and Fred's sets of armor already, and John could feel the ship winding down around them as the designated sleep cycle began.

He hadn't been able to tell the whole story in one shot " Kelly, mostly, kept interrupting with questions about the upgrades to ships and weapons that came as a result of the alliance, and John found himself describing the Double-Edged Blade several times, as much as he had seen.

"So you lead the Double Trouble troops and the Spartan IVs?" Fred asked, setting aside the last piece of armor that needed cleaning " Linda's left boot " and looking at the piles of dirt still dotting the floor.

"The Spartan IVs and I train together," John answered. "All humans on Thel's ship answer to me, and I answer to Admiral Hood. The IVs help me train the Double Trouble troops, too."

"Why aren't you higher ranked?" Kelly flicked a piece of dirt from her fatigues, though she was grubby anyway from all the cleaning they had just done.

John shook his head. "With so many promotions to fill dead vacancies, and my stint as a civilian, brass thought it would be best to keep my presence low-key. As much as possible."

"And Earth is all we have left?"

"Mostly. There are possible plans to recolonize some of the planets that were glassed early on in the war, and there are many drifter

families still out there â€" out of touch with humanity, but we estimate as many as one million humans may be floating around in asteroid belts. They may not even know the war is over."

"Will we get armor upgrades when we rejoin the fleet?"

"We brought some with us," John answered Kelly with a grin. "But you'll have to ask N'kane for that; I'm sure Dr. Halsey can help, too." John felt slightly guilty that he hadn't checked on Dr. Halsey, but Carter was under standing orders to attend to anything she needed.

"N'kane is an Elite." Kelly's voice was deadpan.

"And an excellent engineer who helped refine my suit," John said, refusing to indulge in Kelly's aversion. It was sensible â€" they had spent thirty years fighting Elites, after all â€" but he wanted to nip any personal hostility in the bud before they rejoined the fleet.

"Are you sure you want to share the suits' secrets with an Elite?" Kelly pressed.

"We've shared our upgrades to their stealth and shield technology with them in return for their ship shielding and plasma cannons," John answered. "While we still bargain and barter, we are allies â€" which means we get along." The not-so-subtle hint was lost on the woman.

"But we improved on their designs. They're not innovative; they just copied Forerunner tech. We improved it."

"And it has grown leaps and bounds since we had access to unbroken or unsalvaged pieces," John responded. "You don't have to upgrade â€" but it will probably save your life if you do."

Kelly grumbled, but they all knew she'd do it. If nothing else, she hated being any slower than she had to be.

"It is time for dinner," John said, changing the subject. "I'll show you around a bit so you can find your own way around the ship afterwards."

Kelly nodded silently, getting to her feet and into the hallway quickly to leave room for the rest of the Spartan IIs to stand in the crowded room. She knocked on Dr. Halsey's door, ignoring Carter who stood guard at the end of the hallway â€" likely there to direct the doctor if she needed to find something.

"Yes? Come in," Dr. Halsey called from the other side. Kelly pushed the button that John had touched and the door slid open silently; the older woman was sitting on the edge of her bed, her cane next to her. "Kelly," she greeted warmly. "Did you get your armor cleaned up?"

"Yes, ma'am," Kelly answered. "All three sets are done. John saidâ€" We could upgrade them, but the Elite is the only one who knows how."

"I'm sure I can learn," Dr. Halsey said quickly, sensing the younger

woman's reluctance to let an Elite tinker with her armor. "Is it time for dinner?" Kelly nodded slightly and Dr. Halsey stood, gripping her cane. "Excellent. Tell Carter that I can follow you all just fine and I don't need a lift." Clearly, Carter had made the mistake of offering to carry the doctor somewhere; Kelly smiled slightly, remembering her own battles with the older woman, and stepped back to allow the doctor into the hallway. From the look on his face, Carter had heard the conversation clearly â€" as had John, who had a twist to his lips that indicated he was trying not to smile, Linda, and Fred.

"We'll collect Lucy and Tom and meet everyone in the mess hall," John said, glancing at Carter. It would be an ideal time to introduce the newcomers to the two Elites they hadn't met â€" N'kane and L'eto â€" and give them a chance to see the interactions between Spartan IVs, John, and Sangheili.

Carter nodded and disappeared down the hallway towards the engine room, where L'eto and N'kane were often tinkering or talking together in their Sangheili language.

John led the group silently â€" and slowly, for Dr. Halsey's sake â€" to Tom and Lucy's rooms. They found both IIIs in the one closest to the entry point of the hallway, along with Prince, who was spread all over the bed and room, most of his body coiled in the corner between dresser and bed.

The IIIs agreed to leave Prince in the room â€" he didn't look like he wanted to leave anyway â€" and they went to the mess hall. John pointed out the hallway where he was staying and gave everyone the directions to the showers as they moved towards the back of the ship.

They passed the silent bay where the Peliship rested and then walked down the short corridor into the mess hall. It was small and they were the last to arrive â€" N'hamee, N'kane, and L'eto waited by the door while the Spartan IVs were already seated around a table, leaving conspicuous holes that were clearly meant for the IIs and IIIs.

The room came to attention as John led his group through the door; the three Elites saluted and then dipped their heads in respect. "Kelly, Fred, Linda, Tom, Lucy, Dr. Halsey, this is N'hamee, our pilot, N'kane, our mechanic, and L'eto, our engineer and medic." The three Sangheili clicked their mandibles in a friendly greeting. "All three are crew â€" which ranks with Private or Minor â€" so are addressed by name." He turned to the three Sangheili and motioned to the humans behind him as he named them, completing the introduction.

They all gathered their food â€" the humans from their supply crates, the Sangheili from the self-serve cafeteria window â€" and the IVs dragged all the tables together to make a square. They expertly arranged the seating with subtle nudges and hints so that the Sangheili were opposite from Tom, Lucy, and Kelly and each Spartan II or III had a IV for a neighbor. John sat at a corner with Dr. Halsey on his right.

They ate silently, and though it was not a comfortable silence, there was less tension in the room than John had hoped for. When everyone

had finished, the newcomers stood to leave but paused when everyone else called them back for a strategy meeting; they sat down hesitantly as Carter and Naomi whisked away the trash and returned.

"We have eight days to return to the fleet," John said without preamble, glancing at N'hamee for confirmation. The Sangheili nodded. "In that time, we all need to train and prepare you for battle." He directed his words towards the IIs and IIIs, though included Dr. Halsey in them. "Our protocols are different" and you will have to learn to fight beside and take orders from Sangheili. You will likely be asked to lead a squadron under my command; it's not what Spartans are trained for initially, but we're going to have to take over for some of those political promotions I told you about.

"In that interest, I will be setting a strict schedule aboard the ship, and we will be doing everything in pairs. Tom, Lucy, I know from your files you are used to training recruits as a pair, but we need to crash-course you in Sangheili. Kelly, Fred, Linda, you're going to have to learn how to lead unaugmented humans and Sangheili" which means slowing down and considering the lives at your back. N'kane, we need their suits upgraded as much as possible before we rendezvous with the fleet. L'eto, see if you can clone a replacement for Kelly's finger and reattach it tomorrow. N'hamee, you'll have to relieve Cortana on the bridge so she and Dr. Halsey can compile a briefing of their years for Admiral Hood when we return." The three Sangheili nodded without hesitation.

"I will stay with Dr. Halsey, John," Cortana said over the speakers. John ignored the use of his name and nodded in agreement.

"As for us," the Chief continued, looking around at the three generations of Spartans, "we'll be sparring in every spare minute, both in and out of armor." He cast a critical glance over his thinner brother and sisters, as well as Tom and tiny Lucy. "And you will have to regain the weight and muscle you've lost."

"We can do it," Kelly said confidently, cracking her knuckles.

"Then I'll see you in the morning for our first training." John dismissed the company and they left quickly, though the newcomers let the Sangheili leave first. He sat for a moment in the mess, staring into his helmet's visor on the table.

Cortana's voice was gentle when she spoke. "Are you okay?" she asked, the mess door closing to allow them some privacy.

"I just thought it'd be" different," John admitted, dragging one gloved hand across his buzz-cut hair. "I don't remember them being so wooden."

There was a small smile" and a tinge of sadness" in Cortana's voice when she answered. "They haven't changed, John. Well, they have" you can tell if you compare their audio and movement patterns with pre-Onyx databases like I have" but they retain their emotional and social conditioning. It's amazing they accepted N'hamee, L'eto, and N'kane."

"Then I've changed," John murmured. "I'm not sure it's for the better."

"Your troops look up to you," Cortana reminded him. "They respect you. You've given them power, responsibilityâ€¦ Hope. You're used to commanding troops now, when before you led three to six Spartans on near-suicide missions. Spartan IIs and IIIs were conditioned to respond best to military rigidness â€" but the IVs, the Double Trouble troops, and the Sangheili were not, and they respond much more eagerly to the new John I've seen recently."

The Spartan II chuckled softly and then sobered. "I don't know if I can trust Tom and Lucy on the battlefield." He slipped his helmet on. "Bring up their files," he requested. Cortana snapped them both onto his HUD immediately. He scanned them quickly, ignoring most of the classified red-tape. "Lucy was going to be discharged for medical reasons, but Kurt kept her."

"Then the question you have to ask yourself is: Do you trust Kurt's judgment?"

"Of course I do," John sighed. "But it's been three years without much human contact. The IIIs were not as rigorously conditioned as we were. They didn't have the extra two years of adolescent training we got, and they didn't lead groups. Can I allow them to lead a mixed group of Sangheili and humans into Brute territory?"

"Can you afford not to?"

John shook his head slightly. "That's a question for Admiral Hood."

Cortana's avatar appeared in his HUD; she looked stern. "It's a question for you, John. These are your Spartans. Admiral Hood has enough on his plate without having to ferry around your troops. So does Thel. You have to decide â€" are they leader material, or do we assign them to wing support?"

John frowned. "Let's see how they do in training tomorrow," he temporized. "They should be used to working together; we'll pair them against Landsmen and Carter and see how they take it."

"Ask L'eto to join you," Cortana suggested. "He's not a great fighter but getting them used to seeing Sangheili on the edges of their vision while in battle will help tone down their fight-or-flight responses to Elites."

John nodded and made himself a mental note. Then he turned to the next problem.

"Kelly will leave troops behind to secure something if she feels that they're slowing her down," he sighed. "I should assign her to an all-Sangheili squad."

"She won't like that."

"They'll keep up with her. She's going to have to learn to take orders from an Elite. I would prefer we not start the lesson on the battlefield, though. Or we can set her to single support and have her play rabbit for any troops that need it."

"That's risky in that she might get shot by our side. Regular troops

aren't used to having a Spartan rabbit around, and the Sangheili don't fight like that."

John sighed. "Let's assign her to single support for now. We can always redeploy when we get there."

"And there is always the chance the Brutes decided to let you be War Chieftain and we'll arrive to a feast in your honor," Cortana teasingly reminded him.

The Master Chief snorted. "Let's not imagine that," he suggested, opening Fred's file next. "Update Fred's ranking to LT, Cortana, and put in a commendation from Kurt." The necessary attachments popped up and the II minimized them quickly. "Fred is solid and a good leader. He might not like it, but he's going to lead an all-human troop. They'll need the backup."

"He'll work well with a Sangheili partner squad," Cortana agreed. "Unless they've promoted someone, my records indicate that Linux Squad - currently onboard the UNSC *\_Leaves of Tomorrow\_* - needs a leader. They're all veterans and could use a steady hand when they start fighting next to Sangheili instead of against them."

"Assign him there for now. If someone is already in position, we'll find another place for Fred." John opened Linda's file.

"Now here's an easy choice," Cortana chuckled. "Sniper?"

John nodded. "She can troop out with the sniper squad. There are some Elites on the team, but not many, and she'll be in her element."

"What about the IVs?"

"I'll take Naomi with me to lead Beta. We'll give the rest squads to lead."

"It'll be mayhem when we get to the fleet," Cortana said. "I sent a message ahead to Admiral Hood, but he will likely not indulge the troops in our discovery until we arrive and can give him a full status update."

"We'll have five fit-for-duty Spartans," John answered.

"What about Dr. Halsey?"

The Spartan frowned slightly. She was technically a civilian - and wanted by ONI. "She's here as a guest of the UNSC," John answered, stalling for time to think. "Once we rejoin the main fleet, ONI will have to figure out what to do with her. For now, you and she should compare notes - bring her up to date on everything that's happened, and get her story into your data banks in case something happens. Prepare a brief for me."

"Already working on it," Cortana answered smoothly. "She is currently reading my report on the Gravemind. I am analyzing her daily reports of their time on C 847 h. I have updated Chief Mendez's files to reflect his death. I labeled it as a casualty of war - a KIA."



John nodded. Chief Mendez had certainly died in the line of duty, though there were people on UNSC's brass who believed in reserving KIA status for those who died in actual battle and assigning a civilian casualty status on those who died elsewhere.

They sat in comfortable silence for a while longer. John stared into his golden visor, working his way through the men and women in his command. He had led Spartans before " but he didn't know if the IIIs were fit for battle. Lucy was clearly not functioning at full capacity, and he couldn't get a good read on Tom. With a little conditioning, the IIs would be ready by the time they regrouped with the rest of the fleet. John just hoped he could get them used to working \_with\_ the Sangheili, not against them.

"Everyone is in their rooms. Most are sleeping," Cortana reported after fifteen minutes of silence. "I would recommend the same for you. Your troops are going to need a lot of conditioning before we rejoin the fleet."

John nodded in agreement. "Goodnight, Cortana," he said, rising. He tucked his helmet under one arm as Cortana returned the sentiment with a warm voice. "Wake me in six hours," he ordered.

The Chief removed his armor quickly, cleaning up a few of the dirtiest spots from their dirt-side adventure. Then he lay in his bed, waiting for sleep to find him. It did so quickly.

\_~~The next morning~~\_

"John, there's a message from Admiral Hood you might want to look at."

Cortana's voice woke the sleeping Spartan II instantly; automatically, he scanned the rooms for threats before her actual words penetrated his sleep-slowed mind.

"Audio?" he asked, sitting up and pulling on a pair of boxers and pants from his dresser.

"Audio only," she replied. "The original encryption wasâ€| different. I've not seen it before, but N'hamee actually recognized it as one of the oldest used by the Sangheili " from \_before\_ the Covenant."

\_That\_ woke John right up; he frowned even as he slipped on a shirt. "Play it," he ordered.

Instead of Admiral Hood's voice, however, John recognized the Arbiter's gravelly tones in the message that played through the speakers in his room. "Eetern ray ootay ol' say."

\_What the hell?\_ John wondered to himself. He didn't recognize it as a Sangheili dialect, and Cortana confirmed that N'hamee had said it was nothing like any tongue the Elites spoke. The AI had compared it to the known languages of the Covenant, and even ancient Earth languages, with no positive returned.

"Wake everyone up," John ordered. He had a feeling this was important. "Tell everyone to meet on the bridge. We need to crack this."

\_A message only a few words " or something " long. Clearly it's a code, but \_what\_? \_John asked himself as he double-timed it onto the bridge. He was the first there, except for N'hamee, who turned around and stood in formal greeting, but the Chief waved his salute off quickly.

"What have we got?" he asked the Sangheili.

"Cortana intercepted the package a few minutes ago, sir," N'hamee answered. The door hissed open behind John; the three Spartan IIs came in, followed quickly by the IVs, IIIs, and Dr. Halsey. L'eto and N'kane were the last to the bridge. They gathered silently as N'hamee continued. "After breaking the original encryption, we found the audio file " audio only " and played it." He tapped a button on his screen and the weird sounds played again.

Lazlakovic raised an eyebrow. "I take it it's not an alien language?" she asked the Sangheili. N'hamee shook his head in the negative, a human gesture he had picked up from the Spartans.

"I have compared it to ancient Earth languages as well," Cortana said, appearing on her holographic panel and crossing her arms in frustration. "I would suspect tampering, but" Something tells me this is important."

John nodded in agreement. "Admiral Hood would not encrypt an audio-only file to us from Thel just for kicks," he agreed. "Replay the message."

All of them listened carefully. Dr. Halsey turned to Cortana. "Can I see the original encryption?" she asked, glancing to John for permission. The Spartan II nodded automatically.

Cortana gestured to one of the screens in front of John; the text flowed up it like credits. They all read it.

\_To: Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Spartan II-117, Sangheili ship\_ Shadow of Veracity

\_From: Admiral Hood, UNSC hybrid \_Double-Edged Blade

\_-AUDIO ONLY"

The encryption passcode was one word, written in the Sangheili dialect, which Cortana translated roughly to mean "a place where children gather" " N'hamee explained. "It is like your schools, I believe, though it is a place of learning for the body, not the mind. We have a different word for what you call "school." The encryption was used before we joined the Covenant, and fell out of use. I only knew of it because of my fascination with pre-Covenant history " which the Arbiter had to know about to send this particular one."

L'eto nodded. "I recall such codes being mentioned in training, but they were undervalued. We did not hold to our pre-treaty ways."

"All the more fools, we," N'kane said softly. The other two Sangheili nodded in agreement.

John glanced at his Spartans; Carter was frowning thoughtfully to himself. "What's on your mind, Carter?" John asked. Everyone looked to the IV quickly, who glanced up with a blush.

"It's justâ€¦ Sir, it \_sounds\_ to me like the Arbiter or the Admiral are sending us a message that only those here could understand." He gestured around to include the three Sangheili. "The original encryption was Sangheili â€" and ancient, so that very few would recognize it, let alone be able to crack it. They can't know we have Dr. Halsey, Kelly, Fred, Linda, Tom, and Lucy aboard, so we have to assume one of \_us\_ has the final key."

John nodded. "That makes sense," Dr. Halsey agreed. "So. The Sangheili cracked the original encryption, with the schoolyard code. That means the second part â€" the audio file â€" has to be something human, something you IVs or John would recognize."

John frowned thoughtfully. "Replay that message," he said to Cortana. The jargon played from the speakers.

Lazlakovic sighed. "Let's assume the theme of codes continues. It's not a direct Earth language. It's in audio, so it's got to be something we can puzzle out verbally."

Naomi moved forward to one of the screens and started writing. "Here's what it \_looks\_ like it sounds like," she said, indicating the letters written in her neat hand.

"Schools," Lazlakovic muttered to herself. "The original code had to do with schools. What do we share with your kind that would make a link possible?" she asked the three Sangheili. "Do your children play like ours? Rough and tumble games? Organized sports, like kicking a ball through a hoop or into a goal?"

N'kane nodded eagerly. "All that and more. We make no gender distinction until they are older, so the males and females play together much more than I believe is common in your culture."

L'eto clicked his mandibles. "My youngest daughter had just started speaking when I left Sanghelios," he said quietly. "But her older brother was always talking in tongues."

"Children's codes," Naomi agreed. "Children make up funny ways to say things or refer to things, thinking we adults can't understand it."

The Spartan IIs exchanged bemused glances, thinking back to their days of training as children. Even Tom and Lucy shared a pair of small grins.

"Wait a second!" Naomi jabbed at the play button over N'hamee's shoulder. The message played again and the Spartan IV crowed in delight. "Someone taught the Arbiter pig Latin!"

The IIs, IIIs, and Sangheili stared in confusion at the Spartan woman, but the IVs and Dr. Halsey brightened immediately.

"Of course," Dr. Halsey murmured. "One of the oldest ways children circumvent their elders."

Seeing the looks on the II's and III's faces, Naomi explained quickly. "You take the first part of the word, to the first consonant, and put it at the end. Then you add "ay" â€" and you've got what \_sounds\_ like bad Latin."

"No one's spoken Latin for 500 years," Cortana protested. "There are no references to pig Latin in my data banks."

"That's because only kids use it," Naomi answered. "If you decode it, you get..." She quickly crossed out all the \_ay\_s on the screen and re-wrote the correct consonants on the board. "'Return to Sol.'"

The bridge was quiet for a moment. "Is that all?" John asked quietly.

"That's the whole message," Cortana confirmed, her avatar appearing again and crossing its arms. "I've rechecked all the authenticity codes â€" it was sent by Admiral Hood and the Arbiter. The point of origin is just outside the Brute's system."

"Something must have happened," Carter said quietly. "Why would the Admiral send us back to Earth?" He gestured around the bridge. "We have \_all\_ the Spartans right here. This ship is carrying death and destruction." He grinned slightly, but the expression was forced.

"Which means there is a bigger threat on Earth," Cortana added.

"What could be bigger than the Brute home world?" Linda asked softly.

"Whatever is \_behind\_ the Brutes," John answered after a moment. "We stripped the defense grid to take the fight to the Brutes. We thought we'd strike before they had the chance to rebuild their fleet â€" or convince the Engineers to join them. If whatever made the War Chieftain is as smart as we think it is, it â€" or they â€" could be attacking Earth at this moment." He looked at the IIs and IIIs and Dr. Halsey. "Our mission to rescue you was kept quiet. No one knows who we managed to pick up. Few even knew we left the Arbiter's ship."

John turned back to the captain's station, frowning at the message written on the screen before him.

"What are your orders, sir?" Lazlakovic asked quietly.

The Spartan II looked around. If the Admiral and Arbiter were sending him back to Earth, then he would go â€" but he sure as hell didn't like the odds he was probably going up against. Remembering the War Chieftain made his heart beat faster in anticipation of similar Brutes.

"Cortana, send back a message â€" code it the same way. We're going to Earth. N'hamee, correct our course. We're three weeks away."

"We can get there faster if we don't mind not having a ship to leave Earth with," N'hamee said quietly. Sacrificing the ship to save Earth was a small price to pay for the humans on board, but for a pilot, the \_Veracity\_'s death would be a blow.

"Do it," John ordered. N'hamee saluted and turned to the controls. The II turned to the remaining Sangheili and Spartans. "We'll drop out just inside the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, to cover our tracks. In the meantime, we'll train. First, though, we need to upgrade your armor." He looked at Linda, Kelly, Fred, Tom, and Lucy. "We brought spare parts â€" enough to build two more suits, if we get creative."

"It'll be like dressin' up some Barbies," Lazlakovic snickered. "I'll start unpacking with N'kane, Chief."

John nodded and dismissed the Sangheili and Spartan IVs to unpack the spare suit pieces and necessary equipment. He was suddenly grateful that the supply officer had insisted on sending all of the Spartan equipment with them.

"Kelly, Fred, Linda, get your suits on and report to the med bay. We'll have to do the upgrades there." The three Spartan IIs saluted and jogged out of the bridge; John turned to L'eto. "See if you and Dr. Halsey can clone and reattach Kelly's pinkie finger," he instructed the Elite and doctor. They nodded and followed the IVs â€" the Sangheili with a salute, the woman with a farewell smile.

Next, John faced the IIIs. Lucy and Tom came to attention. "Your stunt with the Forerunner ancilla made me question if you were fit for duty," he told them quietly, looking at Lucy. They didn't reply. "The universe has changed since you were lost. In the future, you will have to follow any order I give you without hesitation or question. It could mean all our lives. If you feel incapable of doing so, tell me now and I will strike you from the rolls."

"We're ready, sir," Tom answered.

"You're Spartans. You may not be my generation, but we are still siblings, and I am still your commanding officer," he told them severely. "Gather your equipment and meet Lazlakovic in the medical bay." They saluted; he dismissed them and then gave N'hamee his orders to bring them to Earth at best speed. Then he went to the med bay to find his troops.

The Spartan IIIs were stripped and holding pieces of mismatched MJOLNIR armor pieces to their bodies, trying to find ones that fit their smaller statures when John entered the bay. His Mark VII was already waiting; clearly one of his IVs had fetched it and the equipment it needed from his room, anticipating his arrival. The II quickly changed into the body suit he needed to wear the armor, but before putting it on, decided to run a check through all the seals and joints. They would be short on stock once the IIIs, Fred, Linda, and Kelly were upgraded.

He replaced two of the seals that had cracks and then armored up, ignoring the good-natured jealousy from his fellow IIs as they replaced every seal in their own armor.

"I like this," Linda muttered, turning a brand-new forearm piece over in her hands. John grinned slightly.

"That's from the Mark VI," he told her. "It has a Jackal-like forearm shield. Not as powerful as a full-body shield, but it's good in a

pinch. Rechargeable, too."

N'kane heaved another crate out of the pile of supplies. "I believe we have three of them, enough for each of you to take one," he said. "If you will permit, I will make the substitution."

Linda hesitated a moment, glancing at John, before nodding. "Thanks." She was clearly still trying to get used to idea that the Sangheili was there to help. He smiled at her.

"I know it is strange," he told her " and the others. "Both sides have a lot to get used to."

"Yeah," Naomi chuckled as she came in. "That's all the parts. Scrounge around a bit, you'll find some good stuff. Not much Mark VII, though " we IVs can't handle it and brass thought the Chief was the only one who would be wearing it, so they didn't make many replacement parts."

"Why is your armor all different colors?" Fred asked as he dug into another crate. N'kane had taken the forearm piece from her and was attaching it to the rest of her armor.

"To tell us apart," Carter called from the other side of the bay where he was trying to stuff Lucy's armor with padding so it would fit her slender arms. "Brass wanted it to be clear that we weren't IIs or IIIs, either. So we got to pick our own colors. Kind of like a rainbow brigade."

Naomi chuckled. "We didn't choose any greens 'cause, well, that's his color." She gestured to John, who protested with a grunt.

"I didn't choose it," he answered.

"Well, it goes nice with your eyes," Naomi shot back, grinning. "Besides, we could paint you pink."

"You'd be dead pretty damn quick," Landsmen told the IV.

"It's undignified," Carter put in with a cackle. "Could you imagine if the Chief showed up on the battlefield in pink armor? We'd kill Brutes with laughter."

"You have a point," Basky said thoughtfully. "I think I saw a can of paint around here somewhere" He grinned as the IVs and John shared a hearty laugh. Fred and Linda chuckled, too.

Kelly suddenly appeared from one of the attached rooms, Dr. Halsey closely in tow. She held up her hand with the newly-attached, bright pink pinkie finger, wiggling it experimentally. John grinned, happy to see his sister back in one full piece.

"How's it feel?" he asked.

"Natural," she answered, clenching her fist and then opening it.

"I suggest moving it as often as you can think of it to reacquaint your brain with remembering you have a pinky back," Dr. Halsey told the Spartan.

"Yes, doctor," she answered seriously. "Thank you."

"Don't forget to thank L'eto," the woman said quietly, waving towards the room they had come out of. Kelly nodded, though John felt the reluctance in the movement. "He did most of the work."

Dr. Halsey looked around the room and then waved a polite goodbye in civilian fashion and left, probably headed for her room or the bridge. John intercepted Kelly gently as she was about to move towards the pile of armor. He glanced between her and the room she had come out of significantly; she sighed, nodded, and turned back around.

He could hear her thank the Sangheili for his assistance â€" he replied with all the grace and formality the Chief had heard from an Elite. Kelly came back out quickly and went straight for the armor; the Elite followed a moment later.

"When we found you, there was talk of creating a set of Sangheili armor in your honor," L'eto said as he noticed John standing in front of him. The II raised an eyebrow in silent query. "I heard the discussion of painting your armor," the Elite admitted. "The Arbiter argued that dishonoring your own armor would not be a suitable action, and thus the energy sword was agreed upon as a gift."

John nodded, remembering the energy sword still in his armor's thigh pocket. "I wondered why Thel gave me one," he said.

The Sangheili smiled, clicking his mandibles. "For the one who exposed such truths as you did, armor would have been more suitable. Though I do not think anyone would paint it pink â€" more likely gold or red, as befitting your rank."

"But Thel knew I wouldn't wear it," John pointed out.

The Sangheili nodded. "Though it was agreed you would not be given the title of â€" I believe you call them 'Aristocrats.'"

John snorted. He remembered Thel explaining just \_what\_ an Aristocrat was supposed to do in Sangheili culture. Passing on their warrior genes was one of their main functions.

John noted Kelly frowning slightly; he had explained his "adoption" into Sangheili society, with his alien name and energy sword standing in for the ritualistic armor a Sangheili recruit wore, and she clearly still disapproved.

## 11. Getting Up to Spar

\_Warning: some coarse language/concepts/themes a bit later, meant to explore a side of the IIs we don't get in the canon verse. Please do review! I love reading good reviews, heehee.\_

### **\*\*Chapter 10: Getting Up to Spar\*\***

Carter gave up trying to make the armor fit Lucy and stood back, staring at the young woman with a hand on his chin. "You're too damn small," he told her, inviting her to share a chuckle. She just shrugged. "Alright, let's try a bodysuit on. Maybe that will bulk you

up enough."

"What's the problem?" John asked, coming over.

"Lucy's just too small for our armor," the IV answered, handing the woman their smallest body suit.

"Our own armor is good enough," Tom said from where he was working with Naomi trying on boots. Thankfully, they had a few pairs of those, so at least his feet would match.

John, however, shook his head. "Not against Brutes, it isn't," he replied, glancing at the III's stacked armor. "That's light-combat rig. We'll get to Earth two weeks after whatever is happening has started, which means we could very easily come up to a burned planet." They were all silent. "If that is the case, we're going to need to infiltrate any ships left â€" if there are any â€" and figure out what happened."

"They have the Orbital Defense Grid," Carter said quietly.

"Which wasn't much good last time," John pointed out. "And whatever is behind the Brutes is at least as advanced as anything we've seen before, possibly far out-stripping even the Forerunner tech we've got."

"We'll just have to trust the Admiral that he wouldn't send us to a hopeless situation," Linda said from where she was watching L'eto take apart her armor's power pack.

John nodded slightly, not mentioning what a captain had said to him once. The conversation hadn't lasted long, but it had been one of the first in which John has felt the loss of his siblings sharply.

"\_Son, you were created to do the impossible. Your brothers and sisters did it â€" you've done it. We're asking you to do it again."\_

John also recalled his response. "\_Yes, sir.\_" At the time, he had been given orders to extract a high-profile target from a Covenant-infested planet. He had succeeded, but his entire support platoon had died.

Naomi noticed his lapse in attention and tossed a rag at the Chief's head. John caught it and glanced at her reprovingly; she smirked slightly and he nodded in thanks.

Kelly noted the silent communication and glanced at Linda, who caught her eyes. The other II had noticed the exchange as well, but she shrugged faintly, unaffected.

It took the rest of that "day" to outfit the IIIs in a set of mismatched armor that made all the IVs snicker when it was completely assembled on Tom and Lucy. It was very easy to tell that the armor had been scrounged â€" most of it was brand new and all in various shades of green.

The IIs received all the upgrades they could handle, including to their neural interface with Dr. Halsey and Cortana's help. John had



cleaned his armor, as had the IVs.

"We'll practice and train in our armor tomorrow," John told the assembled Spartans once all the kinks had been worked out. "For now, get used to moving in your new armor for the rest of the evening." They all struck careful salutes; he dismissed them and went to the bridge.

Cortana greeted him. "I have sent off the message, but there is no reply," she told him immediately. "We will be in the Sol system in fourteen days, but we'll arrive with a dead ship."

"We need to drop out in the asteroid belt," John told the AI and pilot. "Can we ride an asteroid in-system or shadow a comet?"

Cortana brought up the necessary charts and John examined them with her, though she was much faster at finding their ticket than he was. "There," she said, highlighting a particular asteroid. "This one is unstable and likely to be headed in-system soon enough. We could give it a nudge and shadow it past Earth. When we get there, I'll know more" but I assume we're assuming someone or something hostile is taking or will have taken over Earth by the time we arrive?"

"Yes," John answered. "Probably the latter," he added grimly.

"I have tried contacting Earth" nothing is out of the ordinary that I can detect." Cortana's voice was quietly anxious. "If Admiral Hood knows something's wrong with Earth and is sending us to save it, why haven't we received at least a distress signal?"

"Could something be blocking all communications and making dummy comms?" John asked.

"Yes, but I traded handshakes with AIs I know personally," Cortana argued, clearly a little miffed that the Chief suspected her ability to spot a cover-up.

John frowned. "But if we are facing whatever was behind the War Chieftain, they may be able to replicate an AI," John pointed out. "Did you not get a human contact?"

"I'll try again," Cortana said by way of answer.

"Thank you, Cortana." John left N'hamee in charge of the bridge and checked in on the IIs and IIIs. They were running back and forth in the largest room on the ship, the docking bay, to get used to the movement of their new armor, spotting problems and correcting them before they went into training or battle. The IVs watched, a flock of colored armored birds perched atop the Peliship where they could be out of the way.

John joined the IVs in their observation; Naomi scooted over to make the Chief a spot up front and knocked shoulder armor with him. "Kelly's faster than anyone I've seen before," she said lowly, in tones of awe. "You're a smidge faster than us, but" \_Damn\_."

The II smiled; he could tell Kelly had heard the praise by the way her nose twitched. She liked being remarked upon for her speed, just as she liked being the fastest human in the universe. It was a mark

of pride, but it had never hurt her, and encouraged her to constantly improve her time.

"We haven't had a chance to settle down and get to know each other since we picked 'em up," Carter said. He scratched behind his ear, his helmet resting on his knee.

John coughed warningly at the slight smirk on the IV's face. "Remember, Carter, IIs aren't used to your sort of interaction."

Naomi snorted, nudging the three males sharply. "No flirting!" she translated.

"Aw, Naomi, you know I couldn't have eyes for any gal but you," Carter gushed, grinning foolishly at the younger woman.

"I'll gouge your eyes out if you try anything," she assured him with a laugh.

John grinned slightly. He was well used to the false flirting the IVs practiced â€" it was very Marine-like, though they tended to take it to extremes he hadn't witnessed in thirty years of warfare â€" but he knew it would catch his Spartan brother and sisters by surprise. The sexual drives that had been trained out of him and the rest of the IIs â€" and the IIIs, likely â€" was present in the IVs in what he considered almost unhealthy amounts, but without much comparison, he was unsure if he was simply inexperienced.

"Yeah, next to them, you're practically one o' us," Landsmen was saying to the Chief when he tuned back into their banter. John raised an eyebrow in confusion. "Yanno, you \_get\_ that we're just jokin' and aren't actually interested in fuckin' â€" least, not on a mission. And Rebecca's got her claim on ya, so there's that."

Now John was completely unsure; he hadn't realized \_he\_ had been a target of flirtation. Or that Rebecca had any kind of claim on hisâ€" what? Clearly, the IVs read his expression correctly and all burst into laughter, which made the IIs and IIIs turn to look at them.

Naomi covered her face. "Oh, lords, you didn't realize, did you?"

"Uhâ€" John shook his head. "No."

Lazlakovic even grinned and patted John's head like a good dog; since she was sitting behind him, on a taller portion of the Peliship, she had to reach down to do it. "You're so innocent in some ways, John," she told him mock-severely. The Chief shook his head slightly. It was the first time any of the IVs had referred to him by name; it made him feel kind of strange. He decided to examine that later and turn back to the topic at hand. Much as he would have liked to ignore it, if he was missing something vital in his interactions with his soldiers, he needed to know about it.

"Hell, Chief, I thought Rebecca might've at leastâ€" Naomi threw the closest object, which happened to be John's helmet, at Landsmen, who ducked it with a hearty laugh. Carter, behind him, caught the helmet so it didn't get injured. "â€" \_prepared\_ you," Landsmen

finished.

Now John was really confused. The IVs knew about his stint as a civilian " he had shared amusing stories about trying to fit in during their long training sessions, between spars " and knew who Rebecca was, but the Chief hadn't expected them to draw that conclusion.

"I'm sure he can handle himself when it comes to Rebecca," Naomi told Landsmen severely. The Chief looked to his IIs for backup, but Fred, Kelly, and Linda were just staring at them in confusion. "Right?" she turned back to the II.

John motioned for Carter to toss his helmet back. "Rebecca is an excellent friend and helped me adjust to civilian life," he said to cover his confusion.

Both Lazlakovic's and Naomi's eyes widened; the three males snorted. "Wait, wait, wait. She never" Naomi stared at John, who was getting decidedly uncomfortable. "You didn't" Jeez, Chief."

Lazlakovic smacked the Chief lightly; the II blinked in confusion and no small amount of frustration. "Would you stop bouncing around the subject?" he growled.

"You and Rebecca," Naomi said, as though he was a slow child. "Rebecca and you. How much clearer can I be?!"

"Are you asking if we engaged in a relationship?" the Chief asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Exactly!" the IV agreed, nodding.

"No," he answered, shaking his head.

"Seriously?" Now it was Carter's turn to pry; John frowned, decidedly uncomfortable. He was their commanding officer, after all, and his civilian life was really not something he wished to dwell on, especially as it concerned Rebecca. "You had a whole year and, yanno, Rebecca's a beautiful woman, and you were fresh out of the military"

"Would you shut up?" Lazlakovic smacked her fellow Spartan slightly harder than necessary. "It's none of our business."

John nodded in relief and agreement.

"What'd they do, remove your sex drives?" Naomi asked. Apparently her curiosity " and prying nature " couldn't be curbed by Lazlakovic's warning.

"Of course," Kelly answered; she was standing nearby. At this, all five Spartan IVs straightened, looking from John to the other IIs in absolute amazement. Fred, Kelly, Linda, and John shared a glance.

"Wait, seriously?" Carter asked, sitting up in surprise. "I knew y'all were trained from six years old, but" really?"

"Yes, really," John answered, frowning. "What does this have to do with Rebecca?"

Naomi and Landsmen glanced between each other and blushed furiously. "Umâ€¦| Never mind. We really stepped into that one."

"Wait, then, you're all virgins?"

Four Spartan IVs immediately threw something â€" their preferred method of telling someone to shut up â€" at Landsmen, who was struck by three helmets and a wrench, all of which bounced off his chest harmlessly.

"Hey! It's an honest question!" Landsmen protested.

"It's not polite to ask," Naomi shot back. "'Specially since they're not interested."

John sighed. He had had this talk with his doctor while a civilian, when explaining parts of what his augmentations meant in the medical realm. He turned to the IIs with a shrug. "It's never been an issue before," he told Landsmen, a little testily.

"Yeah, butâ€¦|" Clearly, the IV wasn't getting it. "What about puberty? Being teenagers? Part of growing up is getting caught \_somewhere\_ in the act."

Kelly shrugged. "We never had time or inclination," she answered truthfully. John, recalling their whispered conversations late at night when they'd escaped the training complex, knew she was exaggerating slightly. "Still don't."

"You have time now," Carter pointed out. John reached over before Naomi could do it and whapped the IV gently on the back of the head.

"Ow, Chief," the younger man protested meekly.

"We'll have none of that on this ship," he ordered.

"But you know about all of it, right?" Naomi asked curiously, jumping down from the Pelican. "Wait, do you have menstrual cycles?"

John and Fred snorted; Kelly and Linda shared a glance. "No," they answered in unison. "It would interfere with our function as Spartans," Kelly explained.

The two male IIs exchanged glances. They hadn't exactly \_asked\_ what had stopped those periods of hormone-driven insanity in all the female Spartan IIs. John had assumed they were given a medication to halt them, but something Rebecca had said about "getting rid of the baby-maker" to relieve her own week of painful cramping suddenly made the Chief wonder.

"So jealous," Naomi muttered.

"What about when you left the service?" Landsmen asked curiously. "Wouldn't you want to have kids?"

John and the IIs looked at him like he had grown a third head. "We'd

never leave the UNSC," John answered softly, glancing at his fellow IIs. "I had no choice at the time, and I won't be making that mistake again."

"We weren't supposed to survive past our mission," Tom chimed in, coming closer with Lucy. They looked like children dressed in their parents' clothing, with the mismatched pieces and slight hesitation in their movements, as though they could trip over their own toes any moment.

John nodded; he had read the action report about Pegasii Delta. However, the IVs frowned in unison.

"Once we're done with this Brute invasion, I'm slated to be released," Naomi said with an air of near guilt. "Go back to Earth and see my husband." John started; he hadn't known the younger woman had a husband. She grinned slightly. "He's a good 'un, Chief, you'd like him. Former ODST himself. He'd be here with me, 'cept a Grunt shot off his foot in action."

"We're all on our last years," Lazlakovic said, gesturing around. "That's why they wanted us for the IV program. Figured, if they can't take us out with suicide missions as ODSTs, they'd do it as Spartans. And we're vets. We knew the risks goin' in, we've got experience, the instincts. We just didn't have the muscle and stamina to do what you did." She tilted her head to the IIs and IIIs. "I've been feelin' that nesting instinct myself. Might just find me a willin' man when I get out, have a few kiddies. Lords know we need to rebuild our population."

John glanced at Kelly and Linda, wondering if they had any of the same inclinations. He certainly didn't feel the need to have children of his own, though he couldn't deny that he had enjoyed helping Rebecca with the class that had come to her farm on a field trip.

However, Kelly answered his mental question immediately by shaking her head. "Kids tie you down," she argued. "They're liabilities."

Lazlakovic smiled slightly. "And how many kiddies have you been around, Kelly?" she asked teasingly. Shrugging, Kelly admitted she'd never really been around them. "Childrenâ€¦ The whole world is new and wonderful and bright to their eyes. Their first reaction is curiosity; their second is wonder."

"It's a moot question for us anyway," Linda said quietly. "We'd never leave the UNSC. This is all we know."

"But they might not be able to support four Spartan IIs and two IIIs without a war to fight. The budget cuts that saw the Chief out will be back. This war with the Brutes means the brass is rolling in the dough 'cause no one wants a repeat of the war we just finished, but that'll end when the Brutes are no longer a concern," Carter pointed out seriously.

John snorted softly. Human nature was to war; there would always be dangerous missions that a Spartan could pull off without high casualties. The budget cuts were very short-sighted.

"For now, we need to focus on getting to Earth and assessing the situation," John said after a moment of thoughtful silence. "We'll worry about what's to become of us after the war \_if\_ it becomes an issue."

"Yes, sir," all the Spartans said in unison.

"Cortana says she can't detect anything hostile around Earth now, which means either there is nothing or something is powerful enough to block all signals going in and out, \_and\_ provide the proper counters to our hails," John continued. "We'll take up training tomorrow."

The Spartan IIs and IVs saluted and headed for the mess hall; John was about to follow when Tom and Lucy stepped forward and came to attention. He returned their salute quickly, but they were still edgy even as they relaxed slightly into rest stances. "We were wondering what kind of fresh supplies are on board, sir," Tom said. "Prince needs to be fed once or twice a week, something preferably fresh and about as large as Ripper."

John suddenly wondered where the koala, wolf, and bird were â€" probably in their owners' rooms. He hadn't seen them since the last evening. He frowned thoughtfully. "We don't have fresh supplies," he told them. They were in space, after all â€" everything was at least dehydrated. "However, I'm sure we can find something that will suit. If we rehydrate some beef?" he suggested, leading the way to the supplies crates.

"I think that would do," Tom said. "He's used to eating cooked and uncooked meat." All their meat was pre-cooked. John let the two IIIs take thirty pounds of beef cuts with them and then joined the other Spartans in the cafeteria.

"We'll need to get some more meat on your bones," Lazlakovic was telling the IIs, handing them heaping trays of food. They didn't complain but set to the food with a will. "What're your specialties?"

John sat next to the IV with a tray of his own; Naomi wiggled into a spot on his left, facing Kelly, Fred, and Linda.

"I'm fast," Kelly said.

Lazlakovic laughed. "We saw. I assume you have basic training in every field, from what I've seen of what the Chief can do. And you're outstanding soldiers."

"I've been trained as a sniper," Linda said quietly.

Fred shrugged slightly. "I'm best at close combat," he answered, touching the knife that never left his hip.

"We've all got training in cartography, cryptography, all forms of martial arts, heavy weapons combat, pilotingâ€¦ There isn't a lot we \_can't\_ do," Kelly added with a touch of pride in her voice.

"What's your specialty?" Naomi asked John, glancing at him.

The II shrugged. "I was trained to lead groups of Spartans on

missions."

"Luck!" Kelly objected immediately. "John's always had an incredible amount of luck."

Lazlakovic grinned slightly. "Well, sniper's not something we've trained for, but we probably won't need to improve your skills in that specifically," she said to Linda. "All three of you really just need to improve your wind and speed, overall. Get used to getting hit and hitting back, wouldn't you say, sir?" She turned to the Chief, realizing that he was technically in charge.

John nodded. "And we'll need to do it with and without armor," he added. "We can't risk breaking anyone's armor â€" we don't have many spares."

"So, starting without armor?" Lazlakovic asked. The Chief nodded. "Oh, this should be fun." The IVs grinned; the three IIs on the other side of the table smirked in return.

"Don't think we've gone soft just because we've been on Solstice," Kelly warned the IVs. "We've fought off critters bigger than a dozen Brutes."

"But you aren't used to organized fighting anymore," the Chief reminded them. "You won't need to learn all of our new maneuvers anymore â€" at least not yet â€" but fighting with the IVs and IIIs will be different."

"Where are Tom and Lucy?" Linda asked, looking around.

"Feeding Prince," John answered easily.

"Oh, good," Carter joked. "I was afraid that snake would find one of us and decide on a meal."

"More like a snack," Kelly quipped. The IVs chuckled.

"How did you tame all those creatures?" Lazlakovic asked curiously. "We haven't heard about your time away."

"It's a long tale," Kelly said warningly.

"Then start talking," Lazlakovic ordered, leaning forward in anticipation.

The three IIs took turns talking, describing the countless â€" well, Dr. Halsey had counted â€" days spent repairing the Pelican, escaping the Dyson Sphere, and then living on Solstice. Linda explained how they had met Keen Sacrifice and what he had done for them â€" when John noted that several planets existed that met the conditions the ancilla had told them, closer to Earth, she frowned in confusion and told him that Dr. Halsey had chosen their destination.

Tom and Lucy joined them eventually, eating quietly and then leaving straight away. By the time the three IIs had finished relating their adventure, weariness had set into every Spartan and they agreed to meet the next morning at 0600 to begin training.

John retired to his room, head buzzing. Cortana's voice drifted from the intercom as soon as the door shut behind him. "I have a brief prepared for you based on Dr. Halsey's notes about their years in the Dyson Sphere and then on Solstice, but I think you got the full report from Kelly, Fred, and Linda."

John nodded, removing his shirt and going to the small washbasin. "Anything they left out?"

"Only details about some of the flora and fauna that likely wouldn't interest you anyway," the AI assured him. "I have received confirmation from Earth that nothing has pinged their sensors yet â€" but they will stay alert."

"Keep in touch. I want to know the moment they get attacked. Even if we are too far away to do anythingâ€"|" He frowned slightly, rubbing a wet washcloth over his face to clean it. "Will we have enough juice left to make our entry undetected when we get to the asteroid belt?"

"Yes. N'hamee and I have done the calculations several times over. Unless we get knocked out of our path again, we should arrive without tripping any alarms, and we'll have just enough "juice" to kick that asteroid I pointed out towards Earth."

"Just make sure we don't actually send it on a collision course."

"I think I can manage that," Cortana replied with a slightly acidic undertone. John raised a silent eyebrow at the tartness in her tone, unable to respond with his mouth full of toothpaste. He spat it out and paused before continuing with his brushing to reply.

"Is this about the audio code?"

Cortana sighed. "Yes," she admitted. "How useful can I be if I don't know things? I'd never heard of pig Latin before, and I'm supposed to know everything about humanity's history. And I'm the foremost expert on Covenant and Forerunner history."

"You didn't go to school," John pointed out. "Neither did I. I didn't know about it, either." He swirled a bit of water around in his mouth to clean out the taste of the dry toothpaste. "We couldn't possibly fit every bit of our culture into your chip, Cortana. Some things are beyond us both."

Cortana huffed, but in agreement. "Dr. Halsey explained the significance of pig Latin to me, but I still think it was ratherâ€"| childishâ€"|"

"That's the point," John reminded her. "It was a code used by children. It had to be easy to remember and replicate."

"But sending us a code like thatâ€"| Wouldn't it have been simpler to use one of the UNSC's encryptions, or even a current Sangheili one? Even something personal to you, John, would have worked."

"I wasn't trained extensively in cryptography," the AI answered. "I am operating under the assumption that something has gone wrong with the fleet. Perhaps the Brutes were farther along on their fleet than anyone could have known; perhaps they were already gone by the



time Admiral Hood came into range to probe the planet with our recon drones. Without further communication, we simply cannot be sure. We have our orders."

"'Return to Sol,'" Cortana repeated. "Which we are doing with all haste."

"It will take two weeks to bring the Spartans back up to fighting trim," John added. "Keep trying to hail Admiral Hood and the Arbiter, and keep in touch with Earth. If something changes, no matter how small, wake me." He lay down on the purple gel bed and the lights automatically dimmed to a pleasant twilight. They would darken completely over the next few minutes, mimicking a natural sunset.

"Goodnight, John. Sleep well."

"Goodnight, Cortana." John closed his eyes and was asleep almost immediately.

\_~~Elsewhere in the ship~~\_

Kelly folded her clothing neatly. The cool air of the ship â€" drier than she was used to â€" was comfortable on her skin as she lay down on the bed. The lights dimmed and slowly reached full darkness. She waited for that complete darkness, counting her heartbeats and thinking about the day's adventure.

Something was wrong with Earth. From what John had said, the defenses were mostly stripped â€" a preemptive strike on the Brute home world had taken all of humanity's defenders away from their last planet. But if the Brutes didn't have a fleet, how were they threatening Earth? What was behind the dumb beasts that made John so wary?

Wondering would get her nowhere, she knew, but her mind refused to shut down. The IVs comments about retiring â€" John's mention of his own stint as a civilian â€" scared her. She wasn't too proud to admit it. The thought of being useless, of returning to a life like the one on Solstice but by choice rather than force, made her shudder. She was a Spartan, a soldier. It was all she had ever known.

Peace had never existed for the Spartans. Even when not \_technically\_ at war, the UNSC always had missions to go on, things or people to retrieve â€" or kill. Even exploration missions would be preferable to a dull and dreary civilian life.

Just look what had happened to John, and that in the space of a year! He was much more open now, prone to laughing and joking as much as he had when they had been children together, taunting the trainers. He had clearly connected with the IVs, who held him in some sort of awe. Especially Naomi; Kelly disliked that IV's cheerful attitude the most. Despite their age â€" probably ten years younger than the IIs â€" and experience, they acted like nothing more than green Marines on their first milk run.

Kelly sighed. It wasn't up to her; if John had made new friends, she wouldn't begrudge him their attention. Though she hoped he would not forget that they were still IVs, not as powerful, swift, or strong as the IIs. \_Well, \_Kelly amended to herself\_, not when we're at the top

of our game. \_Comparing her movements to John's, she knew she had slowed down.

The II silently promised herself that she would rise thirty minutes early in the morning and take a run through the ship, both to stretch out tightly-wound muscles and get a head start on the training. With that in mind, she forced herself to relax and simply concentrated on listening to her heartbeats. She was asleep within moments.

\_~~Still elsewhere~~\_

Lazlakovic knocked gently at the door and it slid open quickly, revealing the doctor in a clean set of fatigues, the only clothing available on the ship. Her slender frame, thin grey hair, and muted grey-blue eyes marked her as clearly as the cane leaning against the doorframe.

"Come in," she said invitingly, stepping back. Lazlakovic followed her into the room; the door hissed shut behind her. "We haven't really been introduced. I'm Dr. Catherine Halsey."

"Miranda Lazlakovic," the IV responded, taking the seat the woman indicated. "Spartan IV."

There was a strange light in Dr. Halsey's eyes as she sat facing the younger woman. "Spartan IV," she repeated, smiling slightly. "Tell me, Miranda, what kind of augmentations were you subjected to?"

Lazlakovic shifted slightly, shrugging. "I don't know all the fancy words, ma'am. I just wanted to be a better soldier, and when they asked for volunteers, I signed up. I'm sure Cortana has the records."

"Yes, but since my clearance is no longer what it used to beâ€¦" The doctor sighed, shaking her head slightly. "But, never mind that. I suppose you didn't come just to let me interrogate you about you and your team." She tilted her head slightly, a move the IV had seen John imitate many times.

"Well, no, ma'am," Lazlakovic admitted. "As you know, I'm second in command here â€" and usually, I'd know my CO better, but I've only worked with the Chief for a few weeks, and most of our time has been spent training up the Double Trouble troops. He's not one for chitchat."

"No, he never was," Dr. Halsey said quietly to herself.

"And now that he has Kelly, Fred, and Linda back, I am worriedâ€¦" She paused, unable to articulate exactly what she was trying to say.

"Are you worried he will forget that the IVs are not as powerful or integrated as the IIs? Or that he will abandon your team for his own?"

Lazlakovic shook her head, then nodded. "Kind of," she admitted. "More, I'm worried he'll revert to the same mind set from before his stint as a civilian. He is a superb soldier and an excellent leader, but he's better now than I think he could have been without that year

as a civvie. He connects with people now; anyone who's trained with or under him can see a difference."

"You knew him before?"

"Only rumors, ma'am, from my fellow Helljumpers. But I'm not exaggerating when I say that the DT troops would disobey orders if he asked them to. I don't know if he understands just how much power he holds in the UNSC now."

"But John wouldn't disobey orders," Dr. Halsey said. "Unless he has changed more drastically than I have perceived thus far, and the changes I have seen areâ€¦ startling."

Lazlakovic grinned slightly. "You helped raise him. I'm just wondering if I need to have a chat with him about the changes he's made."

Dr. Halsey tapped her lip in thought. "Kelly, Fred, and Linda have changed as well â€" as have Tom and Lucy. But the openness I sense in John is something I wouldn't have thought possible, knowing him as I did."

"If I may break inâ€¦" Cortana's voice sounded from the intercom. "I couldn't help but overhearing."

"By all means," Dr. Halsey said. "You've been with him throughout hisâ€¦ transformation."

The AI sounded slightly defensive when she spoke again. "And it's for the better. Without certainâ€¦ interventionsâ€¦ I am unsure if we would have gotten him back." That made both women in the room sit up a little straighter. "All Spartans have received training to minimize PTSD, but given long hours with nothing but his memories, I began seeing the first signs of it in John when he was first retired. And you know how Spartans deal with problems."

"They remove them," Dr. Halsey said quietly.

"This new John is another layer of defense," the AI continued. "He needed to fit in â€" so he emulated successful civilians. Rebecca was foremost among them. Given enough time, John would have become comfortable enough to establish a moreâ€¦ meaningfulâ€¦ relationship, but we pulled him out before that new him could firmly take root. You're right to be worried, Lazlakovic. He will revert if you give him the chance, especially with Kelly, Fred, and Linda being here. He wants to reconnect with them - badly. They're the only family he's known."

"Then they'll have to open up to meet him; if he closes back up, I don't know how well we'll work together." Lazlakovic shook her head slightly. "We may seem immature and empty-headed, but that's how we interact. I'm not expecting the Chief to be completely informal butâ€¦ The occasional joke, roughhousingâ€¦ We've gotten used to that interaction with him, and I think it builds a better team."

"I would not have agreed with you forty years ago, but now I have seen how well John and your team work together, and I cannot help but consider my own methods as being flawed," the doctor sighed. "When training the IIs, we gave them an enemy to band against â€"

constantly. There were some friendships that sparked, like between Kelly and John, but they were mostly bound by training and necessity, not true friendship."

Lazlakovic nodded. "In my lesser experience, people fight harder for those they love."

Dr. Halsey murmured agreement. "Then I believe we will have to force Kelly, Linda, and Fred into opening up â€" and Tom and Lucy, as much as possible â€" to meet John's new leadership style. It should not be as difficult as you may think; they have an example in John, and your team seems especially well-equipped toâ€| enlightenâ€| them."

Lazlakovic smiled slightly. "We like to include people," she admitted. "We're kind of outcasts among the IVs, really. That's why we teamed up."

"Just be careful," the older woman warned. "Kelly, Fred, and Linda aren't used to interacting with soldiers. They usually stayed in cryosleep for long trips. You could scare them off if you try too hard."

"I'll tell Landsmen he can't flirt with them."

"Warn Naomi as well." Lazlakovic snickered. "Am I merely getting old and protective, or is Naomi singling out John for more attention than I sense is usual?"

The Spartan IV tilted her head slightly. "I think she holds him in awe â€" you know, he is the Master Chief. She's married and not looking to substitute anyone for her man."

"And yourself?" The doctor pierced Lazlakovic with her gaze. The Spartan IV shook her head.

"The Chief's a great man, but I don't go for the strong-and-silent type," she said, grinning slightly. "I'm attached to romantic strolls on the beach, candlelight with my dinner â€" total sap."

"None of the IIs have had any sort of relationship beyond their siblings," the doctor continued seriously.

"Don't worry, ma'am. Inter-team fraternization isn't allowed. Carter and Naomi pretend to have a thing because it's fun for them â€" but everyone knows it's nothing."

"Hmm."

"Thank you for the advice, ma'am." Lazlakovic rose. "Have a good night."

The older woman smiled slightly. "Good night, Miranda." The Spartan IV slipped through the doorway and was gone. Dr. Halsey leaned back in her chair, shifting automatically as her hips protested.

"Well, Cortana, maybe I'm just getting old and sappy, but I think they're going to be just fine." She had been harboring worries about her Spartans' reintegration. They were still not out of the woods â€" who knew what was waiting for them on Earth â€" but at least she

could be sure someone cared for John and understood him.

"Yes, doctor."

"Now, I believe we were discussing the Gravemind's fleet."

\_~~The next morning~~\_

John rose all at once, but lay in bed for a moment gathering his thoughts. "Good morning!" Cortana's cheerful voice came from the intercom, recalling his wandering mind. John sat up and crossed the room, the lights coming up slowly to avoid blinding the occupant of the room. "I was about to wake you up. Kelly is already 'up and at 'em' â€" she's run the length of the ship several times so far, at a sprint. I calculate that she is 64% below her fastest recorded time over that length, and approximately 31% below her average, without armor. Her speed improves every lap, however."

"Good to hear. Where is everyone else?"

"Kelly is close to being done. Fred and Linda are already in the shower. Dr. Halsey is not quite awake â€" we stayed up late talking last night â€" and Tom and Lucy are about to get to the showers. The IVs are all in the cafeteria, as is L'eto. N'kane is going over engine reports, and N'hamee is finally asleep."

"We'll be in the docking bay if you need us," John told the AI. He had finished brushing his teeth and cleaning his face in the time the AI had reported. He left the room and headed straight for the cafeteria, eager to get some breakfast.

The IVs greeted him with grins. Lazlakovic had already set out a tray of food for the Chief, and waved him to it. "Ready to get started on retraining the IIs and IIIs?" she asked.

John nodded, sitting down. "Kelly's been running the halls for the past half-hour."

"Yeah, I heard her tromping by a few times," Naomi said.

"We'll start with strength training â€" that'll be one of the biggest areas where they've lost power. Then stamina. Since we don't know have a lot of weapons with us, we'll likely be going in with minimal firepower â€" so let's stick mostly to hand-to-hand, martial arts, stuff like that."

Lazlakovic nodded. "I thought about how we could make something heavy enough without being awkwardly bulky, but we didn't exactly bring the gym with us."

John shook his head. "We'll have to manage somehow."

"If nothing else, they can bench-press the snake," Carter chuckled. "I just hope he stays happy and full."

"He will," Tom promised as the two IIIs came in through the sliding purple doorway. "He's fat and happy. So long as we don't startle him, he'll stay full for a few days."

"Good morning," Carter replied, waving at the crates of supplies.

"Help yourself. We'll letcha eat and digest but then your asses are ours." He grinned wickedly at the two IIIs; Lucy went straight to the supplies but Tom smirked back.

"Don't count us out, old man," he teased gently.

That won a round of laughter from the IVs, who were happy to see Carter taken down a notch and to hear the III crack a joke. It much better fit his voice and youth than the serious brooding that Lucy was stuck in.

Kelly came in next, hair still wet from the showers, followed quickly by Linda and Fred, who was supporting Dr. Halsey. The comfortable beds, plentiful food, and warm atmosphere had certainly helped with the obvious arthritis attacking her joints, but she still limped a bit. N'kane was the last one to the table, excusing the absence of N'hamee and L'eto.

They all sat around the squared tables, eating their fills. Those who finished joined the conversation as the Spartans decided how they would handle the training for the day, setting up a schedule to keep everyone occupied and working with a new partner at least every couple of hours.

\_~~A few hours later~~\_

"Faster, Kelly," John ordered, striking again. Kelly's block and counter-strike were sloppy, unlike her usual, and slow "if John wanted to, he could easily have pushed aside the block and connected his punch.

The female Spartan II growled in frustration and did the block, but any watcher could see that it simply wasn't fast enough. John swatted her and backed away, inviting an attack. Kelly followed him further into the room. "Keep your eye on the target, but don't forget to watch your back," he warned. "We've fought Brutes before; they're not the brightest of the bunch, but they know how to ambush and they work well in pairs and packs."

"I'm not a greenhorn, John, I know," Kelly snapped, temper fraying quickly. She lashed out, a vicious back-handed swing that could have broken a person's jaw if John had allowed it to land.

"Don't fight with your anger, Kelly," he said, standing down. She leaned over, hands on her knees as she breathed deeply. "Recover your breath and go run some laps with Fred until you're cooled down a bit." She waved him off and nodded in agreement; John looked around.

Lazlakovic and Carter were teaming up on Linda, trying to improve her blocking. Lucy was working with Naomi and Landsmen; Tom, with L'eto and Basky. Fred was running, as he had been for the past two hours, working on rebuilding his stamina. Kelly matched his rhythm, jogging when they couldn't possibly run another step.

John decided to join Naomi and Landsmen in helping Lucy relearn several complicated throws, blocks, kicks, and punches that her body had forgotten. All of the Spartans were moving more smoothly, and everyone in the room was soaking with sweat. The docking bay was the largest room available, so they made sure to work around the Peliship

without damaging it.

After a few more hours, everyone was exhausted, hungry, and sprawled out on the floor like the casualties of a battle, after cooling down and ensuring no one would cramp up or stiffen.

Lazlakovic groaned. "I haven't worked this hard since boot camp," she complained. "I'm too old for this." John snorted. "And you're way too ancient, Chief." He huffed.

"Who's up for lunch?" Carter asked.

"I would be if I could move," Kelly responded.

"Ditto," Naomi agreed. "Carter, you're a spry guy, why don't you get us all something to eat. And drink."

"I don't want to move again," Carter complained. "Chief, will you carry me?"

"In your dreams, Carter," John grunted.

"Awww, I have a chance!" the IV crowed, laughing with a groan. "Gods, Lucy, you killed my ribs with that last strike."

John sat up, surveying the damage. "Alright, let's get moving again. I think we all need showers before we eat."

There were various groans of agreement and unhappiness as the Spartans began sitting up; even L'eto and N'kane, who had joined late, made several displeased remarks.

They trooped to the showers and stripped; each of the humans had new bruises, and the Elites sported slightly darker patches of hide where hits had gone through. "It has been too long since I have fought without armor," L'eto remarked ruefully, touching a dark patch on his shoulder.

"I didn't know you guys bruised like that," Naomi said, standing on her tiptoes to stare at the darkened patch of hide.

"How often have you had the chance to examine them naked?" Carter asked curiously.

"Oh, you know, whenever I caught one in the showers," Naomi replied teasingly, smacking Carter on the back of the head as he wiggled his eyebrows.

"You can catch me in the showers any time you want," he said suggestively, eliciting a snort from Naomi as she turned on the showerhead of her choice and stepped under it.

John scrubbed at his hair under the water, feeling the sweat and grime of the morning's workout fade away under the stream of hot water. The heat soothed his sore muscles.

"Last one to the cafeteria gets the food!" Kelly called, already out of the shower and putting on fresh fatigues. John grumbled but followed suit, as did the rest of the Spartans and the pair of Elites.

Carter, after a vicious slap on the ass from Landsmen as he passed, was last, and served everyone trays of food with a very exaggerated butler attitude. They ate slowly, taking their time to discuss everyone's faults and achievements over the morning's workout.

They repeated the drill that afternoon, though more time was spent on running and playing games of tag throughout the ship than lifting heavy objects or sparring. By dinner time, all of the Spartans and the pair of Elites were exhausted, but happy with the day's work. They would all be sore in the morning, of course. After eating, John released everyone to attend to his or her own armor, and then have some free time. He reported to the bridge and discussed the ship's capabilities with N'hamee, who showed him the engine reports. They tallied up their supplies as well, though most of what they were carrying was food and armor.

The next two weeks followed much the same pattern, with the three IIs and two IIIs improving rapidly, though the II's lack of youth told against them when the younger Spartans compared themselves to the older. However, by the time the anticipated announcement from Cortana indicating that they were close came, John knew he led a team of possibly the deadliest warriors humanity had yet to field.

Thus, when they exited Slipspace with the precision only Covenant stealth ships could, he thought he was ready.

## 12. Final Approach

### \*\*Chapter 11: Final Approach\*\*

"We'll be exiting Slipspace in five standard minutes," Cortana informed the Chief. Everyone was in their armor â€" they had managed to bulk Lucy up enough that she no longer looked like a doll stuffed into a child's clothing, but she was still the smallest Spartan in the room. Tom looked little better, his armor being completely mismatched. Fred, Linda, and Kelly looked at least a little better, though the bright green of the new pieces stood out starkly against their duller, scratched MJOLNIR.

John stood at the captain's station, his magnetic soles locked to the deck. N'hamee, in the pilot's chair, was strapped in; everyone else was braced along the walls. They were coming out into an asteroid field, and their engines were crippled from the haste they had made coming to Earth.

Dr. Halsey was the only one not present on the bridge, and that was mostly for her safety. If a Spartan was knocked around and hit her, the doctor would likely not survive the impact. So she was safely in the Peliship already, awaiting their next move.

The ship dropped smoothly out of Slipspace and, despite John's trepidation, did not immediately lurch with the impact of an asteroid. N'hamee fired their maneuvering thrusters with careful precision to keep them from hitting any of the large rocks, some of which could rival the Peliship in size.

"We're free and clear," Cortana reported. "Activating scanners and probes now. Probe one, away." There was a hollow thump throughout the



ship as a probe was released; they tracked its progress on the forward camera. It zipped off further in-system, towards Earth's position. "I have confirmation fromâ€¦ Scratch that, codes don't match." Confusion was evident in the AI's voice. "No update. Scanning." She sounded preoccupied; John waited. "I think our initial assessment of a cloaking field was correct, Chief," she said. "I am picking up what we'd think is \_normal\_ chatter â€" maintenance, standard runs, that sort of thing. But they haven't picked up the probe."

John frowned. The Earth's defenses were so tight that the small machine \_should\_ have lit up communications and scrambled at least a dozen Pelicans to investigate, even considering the thing's size and Earth's lack of warships.

"One channel seems clear, I'll try to hail someone on it," the AI continued without a pause. "Unidentified civilian channel, this is a friendly. Please respond. Over."

They waited for a few moments; the static suddenly crackled. "What the hell?" The voice that came back through the link was male, clearly not military; he stumbled over a few words and then demanded, "Who is this?"

John motioned for Cortana not to respond then leaned forward slightly, ignoring the button that would have allowed him to speak directly back. "Send code Three-Nine-Two, Cortana, and demand identity," he ordered.

"Aye, sir," she responded cautiously. "Automated response: Three-Niner-Two, please identify yourselves."

"Wait, what?" The man on the other end of the radio was clearly not military; that was a code most would recognize instantly, as it meant the person giving it was on a high-priority mission and ignoring hails. "Uh, I'm Derekâ€¦" There was suddenly the sound of scuffling in the background, then an annoyed voice snapping at someone else. "Hold on."

John glanced around at his Spartans, who looked decidedly unimpressed. He was beginning to feel frustrated.

Another voice suddenly drifted from the radio, much more certain of itself. "This is former Captain Septima. Who'm I talking to?"

John glanced at Cortana, who crossed her arms and nodded. "The channel is secure, sir," she said to his silent question.

"This is Spartan S-117, acting captain of the Sangheili \_Shadow of Veracity\_." There was a stunned silence from the other end of the radio, and John continued. "I need a sit. rep. as quickly as you can give it, Captain."

"Y-yes, sir!" There was obvious relief in the woman's voice. "I'll ask later how and why you're here, but damn, Chief, we need you. Five days ago, all communications stopped â€" for a period of fifteen minutes â€" and then \_seemed\_ to come back up, only no one could actually really talk to anyone else. Cellphones, radios, nothing worked â€" except this little short-wave I had in my antique store. The next day, ships appeared in the sky â€" and I mean \_ships\_.

They're frickin' huge, Chief, and damned if they don't look like some sort of big grey Covenant ship. They shot out all of the defense platforms before we could get our headsâ€¦ Well, really quickly, sir. We've got nothing air worthy left.

"Whatever's inside them isn't clear, but they've got soldiers â€" glowy soldiers, about your size, probably â€" that landed almost immediately, and took out all the major bases and cities. We haven't had contact with anything bigger than a population of 100,000 souls in three days, and they're moving into the rural country now, too. Soon as I saw one of the Glowsticks â€" that's what we call 'em - heading my way, I booked it to my cousin's ranch and hid out with my radio. Figured, the fleet had to come back eventually, and I plan to make hell until that happens."

"Where is everyone?" Cortana asked.

"I've managed to round up some former UNSC that ran, same as I did, and get some civvies, too. We haven't heard from anything off-planet since the attack started. We've been watching what we can, though, the old-fashioned way. Those Glowsticks'll round up a group of a few dozen and pick through it." Here, Septima's voice darkened. "Anyone injured, ill, or disabled gets put down likeâ€¦ rabid dogs. We tried to save a few the first time, butâ€¦ These Glowsticks are freakin' strong, and the only way to stop 'em is severe trauma, usually to the head â€" I guess that's where their brain is. I can't tell if the damn things are organic, mechanical, or both â€" some bleed, some don't. We're out of ammo, but machetes and baseball bats work well, if you get 'em alone. In groups, they're almost impossible to stop."

"Where do they take the healthy ones?"

"To the ships, we think. They go to the cities, and usually just after that, their smaller transports take off and go into the sky. We can't see the ships anymore, though â€" maybe they're cloaked, or maybe they're just hangin' out too far away to see."

"I'm not picking anything up on my scanners," Cortana muttered. "Certainly nothing as large as a warship."

"They're there, I'm tellin' ya," Septima insisted.

"We believe you," John assured her. "We need to get ground-side. Our ship is mostly crippled; we received orders to return to Earth from the Centauri system and pushed our engines to get here as quickly as possible. We've had no contact with the main fleet."

"Neither have we," Septima said. "Hell, I can't call my grammy. How the hell'd you find this station, Chief? And where are you?"

"We're in the asteroid belt, and we've got an entrance planned â€" but we need a distraction or this might not work, and I don't fancy being shot out of the sky."

"Distraction, hm?" There was a decidedly evil note in Septima's voice. "Never fear, sir, I think I can do that for you. When do you need it?" Relief made the captain inclined to forget military radio procedures.

"As soon as possible. I'd rather they not find us out here; we have no weapons on the \_Veracity\_."

"What do you have? 'Cause, sir, not to demean you or nothing, but just one Spartan isn't gonna cut it down here."

"Three Sangheili crew members, Dr. Catherine Halsey, and eleven Spartans."

"Eleven?!" Septima cheered. "Hell, Chief, why didn't ya say so! Get your green butts down here; we've got work for ya. I'll come back when I can get a group together." The radio clicked off and John immediately turned to Cortana.

"Pinpoint their location and then scan for concentrations of life forms â€" see if you can find our missing population," he ordered. Kelly, Fred, and Linda were already gone, likely to pack the Peliship with all the supplies the \_Veracity\_ still held. "Tom, Lucy, get Prince moved into the Peliship." It was going to be a \_very\_ tight fit, with eleven armored Spartans, three Sangheili, Dr. Halsey, supplies, and the animals. They had waited to load the snake to avoid making him anxious. "Lazlakovic, Carter, Basky, recheck the supplies. Is our asteroid still on course?" he asked N'hamee.

"Yes, sir, holding steady. We should be able to crash the \_Shadow of Veracity\_ onto it with enough force to push it out of orbit, and use the maneuvering thrusters to send it past Earth. The Peliship can then take us down, if we don't mind doing it quickly â€" she's almost out of fuel, too."

"We'll have to land as close as possible to these coordinates," Cortana said, highlighting a section of North America that made John raise an eyebrow.

"The Rocky Mountains?" he asked, zooming in on the pinpointed location with a flick of his wrist.

"Septima seems to be located somewhere within this mountain range â€" the San Juans, John, where you lived. I suspect the extensive mining tunnels, lack of large population centers, and abundance of natural resources led \_many\_ refugees to her," Cortana mused. "Plus, only natives could possibly know all the ways in and out of there."

"Anything from the scans?" he asked.

"Nothing," the AI responded slowly, her avatar biting its lip for a moment. "There seem to be clusters of human-sized life forms everywhere, but I can't tell if they're human orâ€" or Glowsticks. What a ridiculous name."

"She said only extreme trauma could take them out," John mused.

"You can provide that," Cortana assured him. "It's these 'packs' of them I'd be worried about. I hate being blind. And deaf. Andâ€" Well, just sensorless. We have no idea what these things are like, really â€" Captain Septima said they were human-like, which means you \_should\_ be able to overpower them. Hopefully."

"Hopefully?" Naomi interrupted.

"If what we saw with the War Chieftain was mass-produced in these Glowsticksâ€¦" Cortana trailed off. "You could be facing an army of Spartan-like Glowsticks out there."

That made all of the Spartans slightly nervous. The IIs had proven that their augmentations were superior to the IIIs and IVs, especially the IVs, during the past two weeks of training, allowing them to jump higher, run longer and faster, and lift heavier objects for longer periods, both with and without armor, than their cousins. But eleven against what could be thousands, even hundreds of thousands? They would stand no chance.

Septima's voice suddenly came back on the radio. "Chief, you there?" She didn't wait for a response, knowing the Spartan would be waiting for the hail. "I've got one hell of the distraction coordinated with our friends on the other side of the range. They can give you fifteen minutes, tops â€" after that, you're on your own. They'll be ready in an hour."

"You're going to need to wait for our signal, then. We'll be landing in a Peliship right on top of you," the Chief told the Captain even as he tried to come up with supply alternatives.

"You traced this line?"

"Yes," Cortana replied. "But it was not easy." She sounded smug.

"But if you can do it, whatever's behind the Glowsticks might be able to." There was real concern in the Captain's voice. "They're not smart themselves, but they got something smart behind 'em."

"Then maintain radio silence; I'll run off some decoy signals. Just be ready when we squawk," Cortana instructed.

"Roger. Septima, out." The radio hissed into silence again as Cortana turned to her next task: preserving their LZ.

"N'hamee, start our course in-system," John ordered. The Sangheili saluted and spurred the ship towards a large asteroid, making the collision alarm blare through the bridge. "Silence that bell, Cortana." It shut off immediately, though the AI didn't respond, too caught up in spinning off decoy radio bursts through the probe, which was just passing Mars.

"Cortana, make a map of possible resupply stations nearby our landing site and upload it to my 'lace. Get that probe into cover and have it monitor for us when we go ground-side. Send out all data we have so far and target the fleet's last known position; include a copy to Sanghelios. We'll have to hope someone gets it."

"Workingâ€¦" the AI told him. He was impressed â€" it wasn't often that he could manage to even slow her processes. She must be distracted by something.

The collision alarm appeared on the captain's station; John looked to N'hamee, who was completely engrossed in his task. "All hands, brace for impact," John said through the ship's intercom. He set his feet and waited, the asteroid looming closer.

"Impact in threeâ€¦ twoâ€¦ oneâ€¦" N'hamee grunted as the ship plowed into the rock, immediately sending the whole thing spinning. The view of Mars, in the distance, and the sun beyond it spun wildly as the Sangheili fired the thrusters to right them once more.

"On course," the pilot announced a few moments later, once the ship was smoothly sailing forward again, its hull buckled onto the asteroid. "Fuel reserves depleted. That's all she's got, sir, to borrow a human expression."

"Thank you, N'hamee. Report to the Peliship and prepare for a rough ejection." The trip to Earth would take a few hours, by Cortana's measurements. They would have to blast the doors of the docking bay open to release the transport from the asteroid-ship, a dangerous maneuver when one considered just how much atmosphere would be vented explosively around them.

Now the Chief and Cortana were alone on the bridge, both scanning â€" one through eyes and one through a myriad of external sensors â€" the information the ship could give them. Nothing was coming from any of the moon or Mars bases, and John suspected that whatever had taken over Earth had similarly stripped the outer bases as well.

"Can the long-range camera zoom in further?" he asked, bringing up said display. Cortana's avatar shook its head.

"No, that's as far as we get," she said. Currently, North America was turned towards them, but he couldn't zoom in past seeing a nasty-looking storm system headed for the coast of Florida and some of the largest landmarks, such as the range of mountains stretching across the middle of the continent.

"Do you have access to any satellites?" the Chief asked.

"Negative. They're either knocked down or something's blocking me from accessing them. I can't tell which, which means something really smart is out there countering my signals or they just knocked 'em down. I can't decide which I'd rather it be."

"Knocked down," John said immediately. "Something that can counter you that much would be able to find us, stealth ship or not, and I do not want to think we're flying into a trap."

"It'd be simpler to knock them down, too," Cortana agreed. "Whatever is behind those Glowsticks â€" if there is something; maybe they have hierarchies of intelligence â€" isn't putting forth a real effort here, I think. Captain Septima mentioned large ships, and they obviously wiped out the main population centers faster than I thought possible, judging by how few life form signatures I'm reading. They could easily have just glassed the planet. Maybe." She paused. "I cannot possibly express to you how frustrating it is to have absolutely no intelligence."

"We have some," John protested. "We know that something is here, it's taking over Earth, and the soldiers are called Glowsticks. There's a resistance force, at least two cells that we know of so far. We know the planet, I know the terrain we're dropping into."

"But we don't know the enemy's numbers, movements, base of operations. We don't even know if they're organic or mechanical; Captain Septima said she couldn't tell, and I don't know what she meant by that," Cortana argued.

"We'll just have to ask Captain Septaima when we get down there."

"Or dissect one ourselves," the AI suggested.

They continued working their way through what few images they could get from the long-range camera and probe. Before John knew it, N'hamee was on the intercom. "Chief, we're fifteen minutes from position. The Peliship is packed, and everyone is on board except you two."

"We'll be down in two minutes," the Spartan answered.

Cortana's avatar appeared next to John. "Ready?" she asked. "I have everything set as much as possible from here."

John nodded, taking a bare moment to look around the bridge. He was about to strand his entire team on Earth, in the middle of a hostile invasion, without knowing if he could even get a message through to the Admiral. Cortana's avatar disappeared; he pulled her chip from the main console and slotted it into the back of his helmet.

Double-timing it down to the bay, John ran a last check on his suit's systems. All checked out green, of course. He squeezed himself into the already-crowded Peliship; the hatch hissed closed behind him.

"All stowed?" he asked over the all-hands frequency.

"Yes, sir," Lazlakovic responded. "We've stripped the ship bare, but we still don't have a lot to work with."

"We'll resupply once we land," John assured her. "Cortana, send the signal to Captain Septima."

"Aye, sir," the AI said into his ear. She paused, then chuckled in his ear. "It's starting," she said into their quiet radio. "We have a fifteen minute window, N'hamee, let's not waste it."

"Yes, Cortana," the Sangheili agreed, blasting open the docking bay with the shaped charges the IVs had arranged before loading up. They rocketed out into space, the asteroid countering their movement, and plummeted towards the great expanse of blue, grey, and green.

"We're coming in hot and going to land hotter," N'hamee said through the radio.

Cortana was silent for a moment, then chirped, "Captain Septima will be standing by with a six-man team to help us cart supplies to their base. We'll need to move quickly â€" those Glowsticks will be right on top of us."

"Glowsticks â€" now \_there's\_ a sad name. Makes me want to giggle," Carter mused through the radio.

"Shut up, Carter," Lazlakovic snapped.

"I can bring us down in ten minutes," N'hamee continued as if the interruption had never happened. "I will try to aim us into a ravine, so we can hide the Peliship."

John winked his green light to approve the plan and focused his eyes inward. The double-vision the HUDs required to track both outside and on-screen maps could make green soldiers sick, but he was long used to it and mentally tracked every movement beyond his visor automatically as he scanned through the images coming from the Peliship's forward cameras.

Below, North America was growing quickly. The Peliship's momentum would crush them if N'hamee couldn't pull them out of a dive, but John didn't want them caught in the atmosphere, either.

"What's our plan of attack?" Kelly asked through the private channel, directing the question at John alone.

"Get down in one piece," he answered. She grunted in agreement. "Then rendezvous with Captain Septima and her team, get the supplies unloaded and into cover, and get more background on what's going on here. We don't have enough intel yet to plan an actual attack."

"You sure know how to show a Spartan a good time," she told him with a brief chuckle.

"The party hasn't even started," he said grimly, focusing on a picture from the Peliship's longest-range camera. "Looks like the Glowsticks know we're coming," the Chief said to the rest of the group. The ship lurched as N'hamee altered their course slightly to avoid the three small transports coming at them from below.

"So much for that distraction," Carter muttered. He shifted, which pressed Kelly more firmly into the bulkhead; she nudged him back to his original position. "Sorry."

"Hold on," N'hamee advised. The Peliship turned over; the Spartans were so tightly wedged that they hardly moved, but Prince immediately hissed in unhappiness. Ripper whined; Kelly put a hand on his muzzle and he quieted. They righted. "I think I can lose them for a few minutes through these mountains, but we won't have long once we set down."

"Understood," John answered.

They twisted a few more times, and once John heard the clang of something hitting the Peliship's hull â€" likely a rock. "I see humans ahead," N'hamee reported. "We're landing. Brace yourselves."

John did so, though it was hardly necessary; they touched down quickly but smoothly, and the back hatch immediately opened. The Chief exited instantly, glad to be able to move around again, and surveyed the scene.

They were clearly down in a canyon, which the Peliship barely fit in â€" it was a testament to N'hamee's piloting skill that they had made

it without even scraping much of the paint. Above, on the canyon rim, John spotted three human figures, clearly lookouts â€" they disappeared even as he saw them, probably going back into cover now that the cavalry had arrived.

The landscape was silent except for the sound of wind moving through the ravine and a stream somewhere nearby. Red rocks dominated the area, flat and easily broken â€" sandstone. A few pine trees grew twistedly out of cracks in the ravine walls, straining towards the light, but the majority of the green came from small shrubs, mostly sweet-smelling sage. The river that had clearly carved it from the surrounding harder rock had shrunken over the millenia to a tiny stream he splashed through easily.

"Chief!" The hail came from the north; John turned and saw a heavily-built woman jogging towards him, trailed by six well-muscled men and women. "Let's get moving; those Glowsticks'll be back," she suggested.

"Captain." John nodded in agreement and turned to the Peliship. "Get moving, Spartans," he ordered. "Tom, Lucy, get Prince and the others out first. Dr. Halsey, stay with Fred. L'eto, N'hamee, conceal the Peliship."

They snapped to quickly; the seven newcomers watched in astonishment as they first unloaded Prince, who curled several feet of snake around Lucy's torso. She and Tom saluted the Captain. "Where to, Captain?" Tom asked, as though Prince wasn't eyeballing the humans with distrust.

"That way," she said, pointing to the north, "up" the ravine. "Mine entrance â€" we've got a couple guards out front. Justâ€¦ Don't let it eat anyone, alright?" Septima eyed the snake with misgiving, but the III nodded and the pair set off at a sprint, the bird, koala, and wolf following.

"Supplies next," John ordered, glancing at the Captain. She motioned for her six soldiers to help with the unpacking, though they moved carefully around the Spartans as the IVs and IIs unpacked the Pelican. L'eto and N'hamee were busy dragging brush to pile over the Peliship; it would only hide it from a quick glance, but that was better than nothing. N'kanecarried Dr. Halsey from the ship and set her on her feet gently by Fred.

John grabbed a crate and hoisted it over one shoulder. "Let's go," he ordered. Everyone was carrying at least one crate of supplies, and Fred was also carrying Dr. Halsey. Captain Septima led the way as they jogged towards cover; the mining entrance was not much more than a hole in the side of the ravine, and the two guards standing next to it looked incredibly relieved to see the captain as they ushered everyone inside.

They eyed the Elites with wary looks but didn't try to bar the three Sangheili from getting in, so John didn't reprimand their conduct. A door was shut, casting them mostly into darkness, but before they could light torches or turn on lamps, the Spartans all activated their external headlights. They had come into a dirty tunnel; old, nearly rotted, beams held up the roof at six and a half feet, so that every Spartan except Lucy was uncomfortably hunched.



Silently, they trooped after Captain Septima through the tunnel. It branched off several times, but those side tunnels faded into darkness. John noticed charges laid every five hundred meters, clearly there to collapse the tunnels and intersections if necessary; some were clearly military-grade while others looked like to be home-made.

They finally came into a lit cavern and the Spartans were able to unbend, standing fully straight and looking around. It was roughly a kilometer across, from where they had come out to the other side of the gently-curving "room." John looked down; they were standing on a wooden scaffold nearly thirty feet above the packed-dirt and bedrock floor. There were cook-fires throughout the room, though the major source of light came from several clusters of floodlights pointing towards a bright white screen that scattered the light across the cavern.

"Welcome to our little haven," Captain Septima said, looking out over the cavern with pride. "We've been digging it bigger slowly â€" probably added another ten feet across in the past couple of days. We hope to find more survivors, of course."

There were perhaps two hundred humans below, most of whom were engaged in various tasks centered around cleaning or cooking. Off to one side, next to one of the largest tents in the city of them, a few younger children were playing under the watchful eye of a young woman. In another corner, several teenagers were drilling with a loud-voiced sergeant, whose commands could be heard echoing through the room. Everyone looked dirty, tired, and scared, their movements jerky and the children's laughter subdued.

"We'll put you all over there." Captain Septima pointed towards a cleared area in the northeast corner of the cavern. "If you don't already have plans, Chief," she amended.

He nodded and jumped off the scaffolding, landing lightly on the dirt floor. The stairs he didn't quite trust, and clearly his Spartans agreed, because the IVs and then the IIs followed him down the same way, landing â€" unconsciously or not â€" in a double arc at his back. The IIIs, with Prince, descended together and made a smaller third rank. The Elites decided to risk the stairs â€" though John knew L'eto, at least, was doing so to ensure the doctor, who had told Fred to put her down half-way to the cavern, wouldn't slip.

Everyone turned to stare at the display and the sergeant's voice halted suddenly. John shifted self-consciously and then Naomi's voice was in his ear. "Damn, they know how to make me feel like a naked greenling at first inspection," she joked dryly. John grunted in agreement without turning on the radio; he strode forward, however, and headed straight for the area Captain Septima had pointed out. People scurried out of the path as the line of Spartans moved through, staying especially far back from the IIIs and Prince.

They arranged their supplies in a circle around the cleared space; Carter and L'eto set to putting up the survival tents they had brought along while John took Dr. Halsey, Kelly, and Lazlakovic with him back towards where he had seen Captain Septima last. The operation was efficient beyond the military standard, and John knew their camp would be ready within ten minutes.

The captain was clearly waiting for him, a slightly sardonic grin on her face as she showed them into the command tent, which was little more than a pair of tarps strung up to keep off dirt that fell from the ceiling.

"Alright, here's the deal," she said immediately, laying out a map of the world "on a physical board, though it was able to zoom a little" on a wooden table that was clearly roughly made out of scrap lumber. "Everything red is deserted." The red pins marked the locations of every large city John knew of, and Cortana's overlaid map on his HUD confirmed his estimate. "Every city with over a million inhabitants was hit first; they all just seemed to disappear. We think it started here." She pointed to Australia. "But we cannot confirm any of this. It's mostly conjecture. Yellow tags are for the hunting grounds "where we've got confirmed sightings of those Glowsticks showing up and rounding up people." There were fewer of these, and mostly around smaller cities. "Green is for resistance." There were only a couple of those that John could see, moving the map's focus area around North America. "All in rural areas. We might be missing some, 'cause we can't exactly communicate, but they hit so fast"

"You did well," John said. The woman smiled slightly, unsure of the compliment but taking it at face value. "What forces do you have?"

"Mostly retired guys, Chief," she said, rubbing a hand over the back of her neck. "A lot of civilians "and around here, at least they can usually use a gun, but we don't have any ammo left and, well, I don't want to lose any more, if this is the last of humanity." They all glanced out at the tents. "Our bacon is well and surely cooked. We've been doing supply runs but we have to range further and further "and these tunnels don't go on forever. It won't be long before they figure out we're underground and start digging. I can't shake the feeling that they're just taking their time about it, for whatever reason, and could easily overrun us at any point if they wanted to."

"We've brought some food with us, and medical supplies," Dr. Halsey said, moving forward and shifting John out of the way with a gentle touch on his forearm armor. She peered down at the map, frowning, and then turned to John, holding out her hand. "Give me Cortana and we'll see if we can't work some magic and get better intel," she offered, smiling slightly. "I'm sure someone here will loan me a laptop for a few hours."

"You can use my tent, doctor," Captain Septima offered immediately, motioning to a small but clean tent just outside the tarps. John pulled Cortana's chip from his helmet and handed it to the doctor; she disappeared into the tent.

"Is she in charge?" Captain Septima asked uneasily.

"No," John answered, realizing he had automatically obeyed the doctor due to the past two weeks of doing just that. "I'll be taking over, Captain." Usually, Spartans arrived on-scene, were briefed, and sent out by whoever was in charge, but with this new state of affairs, and his standing in the UNSC, John knew he was under obligation to take over. Also, the captain wasn't technically a Captain, being retired, but she seemed to have a good grasp on the situation.

The woman nodded in relief. "It's damn good to see you here, Chief, but I have to wonder how you knew we were in trouble."

John quickly explained the mission to pick up the missing Spartans, the Admiral's strange message, and their subsequent dash back to Earth. In return, the captain pulled up another map, this one of a smaller region " just the area surrounding them " and marked out all of the tunnels, houses, and towns of interest.

There was a small yellow marker over Yuray, on the southern edge of the map's range, but she explained that the hunting in such small towns was minimal, since they were usually stripped within one visit.

"What about these areas?" John asked, highlighting some of the neighborhoods he remembered.

"With a population density less than one or two dozen people per mile, we don't know. Maybe the Glowsticks are just waiting for them to go to the city for something, or maybe they're already gone. We haven't had word from anyone out there yet; they're too far to risk a supply run just yet." Septima glanced at John with curiosity in her eyes. "I remember from the news " that was your stomping ground, right?"

The Chief nodded in affirmation and turned the discussion back to supply lines. Lazlakovic offered some general ideas but otherwise remained silent. The lights in the cavern made sunset an impossibility, but someone started dimming them as John's clock ticked towards late evening. 2100 hours was lights-out, and the cavern was completely dark outside of the command tent, which they lit with a small lantern to continue their discussion.

### 13. Supply Runs

#### **\*\*Chapter 12: Supply Runs\*\***

"I think we first need to send out teams of Spartans to ferry back supplies for your civilians," the Chief mused after two hours of going over the maps and action reports that the captain had studiously kept. "We can range farther and faster than your teams, and bring back more."

Captain Septima nodded gratefully. "We need medical supplies the most " aspirin, bandages, little things like that. We don't tend to get grievous wounds" Glowsticks are damned good at killing humans. Otherwise, food always helps " we have one expectant mother with us, so if you see baby food and formula, make sure to grab it. She's due any day now."

"Want me to write a shopping list, sir?" Lazlakovic asked over a private channel to the Chief, humor in her voice.

John, however, didn't respond, his visor staring intently at the sea of tents, most of which he could look over. "Let's go," he told the IV instead, ducking under the tarp and heading for their clearing. Lazlakovic, caught flat-footed, jogged a few steps to catch-up, leaving Captain Septima to make a startled salute at their

backs.

"How many teams are we looking at?" Lazlakovic asked, carefully side-stepping past a young guard making his rounds through the camp.

"You'll take Carter and Landsmen east, to New Springs â€" raid the stores, see if you can find survivors. Naomi, Tom, and Lucy will go west to Cattlesroad. Fred, Linda, and Basky will go north to Mountainview. L'eto, N'hamee, and N'kane will go northeast to Whistler. I'll take Kelly and head south."

"To Yuray?"

John nodded. "It'll take about two days to get there, find supplies, and get back, if you aren't slowed by refugees and if no one gets lost in the tunnels. First, we secure our supply lines and ensure this base is well-stocked. Then we'll go hunting Glowsticks." He said it seriously, and Lazlakovic snorted with suppressed laughter.

"Aye, sir. I hope you find her."

John didn't acknowledge that comment as they stepped over the invisible boundary separating the area given over to the Spartans and Sangheili from the rest of the tents. Many people were still working nearby, their tasks quiet and done by routine rather than light, though most were watching the armored soldiers in open fascination.

The Chief gave his orders and split the team; they were low on weapons, but each team would have at least one rifle and several clips. Captain Septima had offered to secure them some clubs â€" apparently the weapon of choice, now that the resistance had run out of bullets â€" but wasn't sure the Spartans could use them without shattering them. They could fashion clubs out of steel beams if it came down to it, and their hand-to-hand skills were polished after two weeks of training board the \_Veracity.\_

"Our priority this time around is to secure survivors and supplies. If you see a Glowstick, engage if they are alone, but do not let them tell anyone we're here." John wanted to keep their position and strength a secret for as long as possible.

Dr. Halsey agreed when consulted to keep the animals happy and contained, though Ripper was already making friends amongst the dogs in camp, even if he was twice the size of the largest pet. The koala and bird hadn't left the tents, and Prince was still coiled up around the hot lamps that provided light to this side of the cavern, apparently disinclined to move.

The Spartans and Sangheili came to attention, saluting smartly. The Chief surveyed them a moment; they made an impressive sight to civilians, but he could see the weaknesses in their armor, haphazardly arranged as it was. "Dismissed," he said, returning the salute.

Kelly followed him out; they exited through the tunnel Captain Septima had originally brought them in on, and would take one of the branches when it turned southward. Everyone had maps of the tunnels uploaded to their HUDs; they also carried a few copies of hand-drawn

maps in case they encountered survivors and had to send them back alone.

They hadn't taken supplies with them, leaving Captain Septima with free range of everything they had brought except the rifles which they did take. She would likely distribute most of the food and medicine as she saw fit, perhaps with Dr. Halsey's recommendations.

The tunnels were dark and musty, the smell of dirt permeating John's helmet as he and Kelly alternatively jogged and ran through the mountain range. They could keep up such a pace for hours and did so silently, each consulting their own thoughts as the hours slipped by. The terrain didn't change much, though they passed through what had been solid rock until mining teams blasted it apart. They didn't meet anyone else, and their radios were silent except for a call-back from Basky's team once when they found a tunnel collapsed, likely due to natural forces, and marked it on everyone's map.

They stopped once for a few hours, John taking the first watch as Kelly sat right on the tunnel floor, leaned against the wall, and fell asleep. They drank from underground pools when they came across them, but focused mostly on moving swiftly.

When they came out at the closest exit to Yuray, slightly to the north of the city, it was midmorning. Their target was one of the closer towns and John had pushed them faster than he thought the other teams were moving.

"Clear," Kelly reported from her position to the right of the tunnel's entrance.

They moved towards the town, which they could see below them. It looked to be deserted, but in an orderly fashion â€" a few papers blew around, but there were no signs of dead in the street. Cars, however, were sitting with open doors and keys still in them, clearly killed by some sort of EMP.

The pair moved quickly and silently through the pine forest, constantly aware of their own and their partner's position as they moved through the trees. Across the valley, John caught a glimpse of the large lake that gave his neighborhood its name and paused for a moment, but he couldn't make out his â€" or Rebecca's â€" house.

They managed to startle a few deer, who froze at seeing the green-armored Spartans emerge silently from the brush at the edge of a meadow and then bounded away gracefully. The two humans skirted the meadow and continued down into the valley.

John went in first, sweeping the backyard of someone's house before sprinting across it and through a door, crushing it completely. Nothing screamed at the noise, and he cleared the building quickly before calling Kelly in. They moved out through the front door and down the street, headed directly towards the grocery store John recalled from his year living in the area.

There were no signs of looting, though some of the fresh food was starting to go out of date. John could almost wish that they had found the grocery store empty, which would have meant someone

nearby was using the supplies, but he knew the camp needed them badly.

Kelly ran across the street to the hardware store, smashed in the windows, and grabbed a pair of large sleds as well as the largest backpacks she could find. They piled both sleds with non-perishable foodstuffs, a few cooking implements, and medical supplies. John, remembering Captain Septima's concern about the pregnant woman, added several bags of disposable diapers, baby formula and food, and a few plastic objects that looked kind of like bite guards to the pile from the same aisle, assuming they had some function in raising a baby.

"Clothing," Kelly said, hefting an empty backpack. "Where's a clothing store around here?"

John frowned slightly; he hadn't shopped for clothing in Yuray, but remembered Rebecca talking about a store called Clever Clothing down the street. "That way," he said, pointing. She nodded and disappeared.

John hefted the sled and nodded, satisfied. Most of the foodstuffs they had were canned, though he had cleaned out the bags of rice and pasta as well. The diapers were big and bulky, taking up more room than he would have liked, but he knew they would be needed eventually. He arranged the containers on the sidewalk, using the cars still parked haphazardly on the street for cover in case something should come into view. John reached into one experimentally, trying the key " it sputtered but coughed and died quickly.

Kelly came back quickly, backpack now stuffed with clothing which he assumed were all sizes. "Made sure to grab some baby stuff, too," she said lowly, surveying the pile of supplies. "It'd take a few trips to clear this place out."

John tilted his head thoughtfully. "Not if we had packhorses." Kelly raised an eyebrow behind her helmet.

"And where would we get those?"

"Rebecca's."

"Of course." Kelly's voice was carefully controlled. John ignored the obvious censure behind it and left the pile of supplies. "Will they go in the tunnels?" she wondered aloud. That made John hesitate a moment, but he continued heading north, returning to the forest for security.

It was the work of fifteen minutes of hard hiking to get up to Rebecca's farm, and John led them around his house without pointing it out to his sister. They hunkered at the edge of the clearing that led to Rebecca's house, surveying it for movement.

"Movement, two o'clock." Kelly snapped her head around towards the barn and saw someone emerge carefully, look around, and dash for the house. It was a middle-aged woman, average height and build, with brown hair and either a darker white or well-tanned skin. She disappeared inside and John could hear Chichi's welcome bark a moment later.

"That's Rebecca," he told Kelly. She either ignored or didn't care to comment on the relief in his voice.

They sprinted together towards the house; John didn't wait to knock but put his shoulder to the front door, having leapt the stairs to avoid falling through the porch. The entrance was loud and scary; Rebecca was frozen in the kitchen and Chichi immediately ran at the intruder, barking loudly. For anyone who didn't know the lovable dog underneath that snarling exterior, it was a fearsome sight.

John ignored the dog, however, as the floor broke underneath him, dropping him nearly half a meter before his boots hit dirt. Kelly, having come in right on his heels in preparation for any threat that might overtake the first through the door, managed not to kick him as she jumped over him, landing in a crash of splinters as she, too, broke through the floor.

Sunk to his knees, John quickly came a stop, his upper torso flung forward with his body's suddenly-arrested momentum. His helmet smacked the floor, crashing his head into the HUD, and then he managed to straight back up, though Chichi was doing her best to chew through the back plate of his armor, uncomfortably close to his more-vulnerable neck.

"Chichi, down!" John ordered, turning on his external speakers.

Confused, Chichi barked again, but stopped running at them, looking uncertainly at the two giant green figures now standing in her living room and possibly threatening her human.

"John?" Rebecca had recovered slightly " though John noted the spilled glass of milk on the floor, which Chichi would be all over in a few minutes.

Though he couldn't take off his helmet, John nodded. "We don't have much time " I don't want those Glowsticks catching us outside." The woman nodded in understanding, coming around the island to murmur soothingly at Chichi, whose hackles were still stiff, and send the dog into the kitchen to lap up the milk noisily. "Are you the only one here?" Carefully, he cleared the wood debris from around his feet, but he didn't try to climb out of the hole he had landed himself in; Kelly did the same.

"Hell, no," she answered, smiling slightly. "Most everyone's still here, at their homes. After those Glowsticks?... rounded up everyone in Yuray this morning, we decided to strike out for the mines. I was just gathering my things and the horses."

"We'll take you to safety," John promised. "How are you communicating?"

"We've agreed to meet at the Blackbird Mine entrance at five," she said. "It's nearly noon."

John nodded, turning slightly to Kelly. She was watching the large dog with distrust written in the way her fingers drifted towards her knife, clearly waiting for Chichi to attack again. "Kelly, this is Rebecca and Chichi. She's friendly."

"The dog or the woman?" Kelly muttered over the private comm, nodding to Rebecca in greeting.

John shook his head slightly in mute reproach and rubbed a glove through Chichi's fur as she came trotting back into the living room, sniffing both Spartans curiously.

"How did you know I would be here?" Rebecca asked, looking into John's visor. Being sunk half a meter into the ground meant they were nearly the same height now.

"I just hoped," he admitted quietly, meeting her eyes through his visor.

"We need your horses," Kelly said, her rough voice reminding John they had to get moving.

"We're taking the goats, too," Rebecca said, her own voice hard. John wondered briefly if Kelly and Rebecca would decide to be friends or cool acquaintances. He had told each about the other, but he sensed that Rebecca was wary about the Spartan, and he knew Kelly disapproved of the civilian ties he had made.

"They'll slow us down." Kelly addressed John directly, but he was in agreement with Rebecca.

"We'll have refugees slowing us down already," he reminded her. "And we could use their milk and cheese." The older woman grunted unhappily.

"Have you packed?" he asked Rebecca. She shook her head; he waved her off towards her bedroom. "Do it quickly; I'll saddle Miss Valentine and get the packs on Red and Lover Boy." Rebecca nodded in agreement and whistled for Chichi to follow her into the bedroom; the two Spartans carefully extracted themselves from their holes and managed to get outside without breaking through the porch, though it groaned under their weight.

Once inside the barn, Kelly eyeballed the grunting pigs with distaste; they would certainly slow down the party. "Can we butcher them now?" she asked John, already estimating their weight.

"Not without Rebecca's permission," the Spartan said firmly. He was removing his gloves and helmet, holding out his hands to one of the horses. The big bay leaned forward and snuffled his hands, then whuffed a greeting, remembering him. He saddled Miss Valentine and attached the pack carriers to the two stallions. Miss Boy whickered when he attached her halter to her mother's saddle.

Kelly had rounded up the goats simply by chasing them down and tying their horns together, resulting in a very confused and very loud tangle of farm animals as the goats all tried to move away from each other. John, spotting the confusion as he led the three horses out of the stalls and into the main avenue through the barn, couldn't help but laugh at the belligerent set to Kelly's shoulders.

"Chichi will herd them," he explained to Kelly. "We can run in on the wings and keep them in line until we get to the mines."



"I'd still rather butcher the pigs." The woman was unhappy with the situation and grumbled, but John knew she wouldn't act without orders.

Rebecca came in suddenly, Chichi following on her heels. She had a small duffle bag slung over one shoulder, which she attached to Miss Valentine's saddle. Spotting the mess of goats, the woman couldn't help but laugh. "Oh, dear," she giggled, untying their horns and releasing them into the driveway.

"I just got them together," Kelly protested.

"Chichi will herd them," Rebecca answered. "They'll give us milk and cheese, which is more than I can saw for you, lazy pig." This was directed at Missy, who oinked and rattled her feed dish. "You fat thing." There was affection in her voice, however, as she patted the pig's stiff-haired back. "I was thinking of leaving them here until I could come back with a hunting party or something," she told John.

"We can butcher them now," Kelly said immediately.

"But could you carry over a ton of meat?" Rebecca asked skeptically.

"With the two packhorses, yes," John answered before Kelly could snap back. He could already foresee a confrontation building between the pair.

"Then go ahead." Rebecca stood back; Kelly drew the long knife from her hip-sheath and moved forward, slitting the pig's throat in one easy motion. It hardly had time to squeal in surprise as she moved on to the two males.

Rebecca held the horses still against the smell of blood as John and Kelly carved up the pigs. They didn't take great care with the carcasses, preferring speed over cleanliness, and were both covered in blood by the time they were done. From the tack room, Rebecca gave them game bags lined in plastic, which they filled and tied to the horses. Chichi stole a thin chunk of ham to lighten their load and ate it while the Spartans cleaned up in the horse trough as much as possible.

"Ready?" John asked Rebecca. She nodded.

"We were going to raid the store in town for supplies," she told John as he lifted her into the saddle.

"We've already packed them," he assured her. "Is anyone else bringing horses?"

Rebecca nodded. "We've got a dozen altogether, if no one got caught."

"That should be enough," he guessed. Hefting a bag of pig meat, the Spartan pushed open the barn doors. He and Kelly flanked Rebecca as she trotted Miss Valentine into the bright sunshine, the two stallions following behind Miss Boy. Chichi, at a whistle from Rebecca, herded the goats towards the road.

John disliked being out in the open and kept a wary eye on the trees and sky above them, as did Kelly, but they arrived in town thirty minutes later without any signs of attack or even pursuit.

Ten people were already gathered outside the grocery store, with the horses Rebecca had promised. Several dogs also milled about, some sniffing the wind as the small group came into sight. Most of the animals were already loaded with supplies, and several backpacks on the ground testified to the supplies their human owners would be carrying.

Luke spotted his sister and called a greeting, not seeing the Spartans immediately as they were helping Chichi keep the goats together at the back of the pack. "About time you got here!" he scolded cheerfully. "I was about-" He stopped mid-sentence as Kelly appeared, sprinting up on Rebecca's left while John did the same on her right, both having heard the hail.

Their sudden appearance shocked the others who had turned at Luke's greeting and they stared at the two Spartans as Rebecca dismounted. "We've got an escort," she said unnecessarily, grinning.

"No shit," Luke replied dryly. "John?" More came out of the surrounding stores at hearing the horses clapping up; there were approximately seventy, all told. This group alone would stretch the camp's limits in terms of space.

John nodded, waving a hand to identify himself. He knew not many could tell Spartans apart, especially in their armor, and he wasn't going to remove his helmet outside in case the Glowsticks showed up.

"Good to see ya, man," Luke said, relief obvious in his voice. "We haven't been able to call anyoneâ€|"

"We'll fill you in back at base," John interrupted. "We need to get you all into the mine tunnels â€" there's a refugee camp to the north we'll take you to." He loaded the bag of meat onto one of the horses without asking whose it was, and Kelly tossed her sack to him to do the same with, unlimbering the two soldiers.

"Is everyone ready?" he asked the group, surveying them. He recognized most of the faces, and they knew him â€" they smiled and nodded, clearly certain they'd be safe. "Let's move, then. Keep together and sing out if you see or hear something. We'll be on the wings."

Kelly melted into the forest as soon as they left the roadway, running ahead and then doubling back to check their six. John stayed closer to the group. With all of the older folks riding, they were hiking into the mountains quickly for such a large group, but the pace was still slower than John would have liked.

"Contact," Kelly suddenly said into his ear. "I think it's a Glowstick â€" I don't recognize it. Four o'clock and closing."

"Just one?" John asked, moving already towards the threat.

"Yes. Engage?"

John was about to answer when something ahead caught his eye; he focused on it and in that moment of inattention, it attacked. It moved faster than he would have thought possible for anything but a Spartan, and it did glow, a bright red-orange coming from the various joints and joinings in its armor. He only had time to get an impression of the thing's profile " two legs, two human-like arms, two weapon-tipped arms, and a very thick torso, all clearly armored " before it hit him, knocking him back towards the group.

"Enemy contact," John spat into his radio, already in the midst of throwing the creature off himself.

"Another here!" Kelly responded, sounding stressed. "They're surrounding the group."

Damn it, John thought to himself as he levered to his feet, meeting the Glowstick's next rush head-on. With a clearer view, John revised his original estimation of the enemy " this thing screamed Forerunner, though it was more curved than the typical angular geometry of Forerunner design.

They were equally matched in strength, roughly; John felt his boots sliding through the dirt and forest debris as he fought to keep the Glowstick from pushing him to his knees or using its larger weapon-arms. His foot hit a slick patch and gave out; his enemy, with a shrill shriek of triumph or laughter, he couldn't tell which, leaned further, pushing the Spartan to his knees.

Roughly twenty meters away, John heard the report of a rifle " a single three-round burst, and then it was silent. The creature ignored the sound, but John knew it meant Kelly had engaged her target and likely put it down.

John grunted as his left leg buckled, following his right, and released his grip on the creature to roll away. It followed him, however, just as fast as Kelly would have in their training sessions, and kicked at his head. The Spartan deflected the kick with his forearm and grabbed its foot, yanking it to the ground.

"One down," Kelly panted into his ear. "Going after that third one."

"Roger," John grunted back, standing back up and pulling his energy sword from his thigh pocket. The creature was already getting back up, the glow between its armor brightening. Its knees were bent backwards, like a Sangheili, though the metal that made them was a dull silver. It had huge shoulder pieces that almost looked like an umbrella; its arms and legs, by comparison, were sleek. From its back, several bent rods arched over its head and shoulder plates, rippling with energy. It looked vaguely triangular, if one discounted its arms and legs.

John brought up his energy sword and attacked, aiming at the thing's head. It caught his sword on one of its weapon-tipped arms, the other swinging towards him with some sort of orange energy sword. He backed quickly away, unwilling to risk injury and trying to draw the creature off balance.

In the distance, again, John picked up the sounds of rifle fire, but apparently Kelly hadn't been able to ambush this foe, as there were

three bursts and then the sound of two large things crashing around. John turned his attention back to his own fight.

The creature followed swiftly, slashing with its sword. John parried the blows he could and ducked the ones he couldn't. Neither managed to score on the other until the Glowstick suddenly tripped. The action was so unexpected that John hesitated before dashing in, suspecting a trick " and his caution likely saved his life as the creature righted itself almost immediately, its sword held out defensively. However, John had committed to the attack and kicked the thing's wrist, pushing the sword to one side so it missed his armor and crackled against his shields. With the same movement, he stabbed his sword straight into the helmet.

The thing stopped moving almost immediately, the glow in its armor fading. The energy sword attached to one of its arms died with a sputter, though it had burned out his shields and blackened his armor within the seconds it had taken to complete the move.

"Clear," he reported to Kelly, looking over the thing with interest.

"Clear," she responded immediately. "Did you get a good look at these things?"

"They're definitely Forerunner," he answered. "But more" Curvy." He nudged the motionless armor.

"Let's bring one back with us," Kelly suggested. "Mine's all mangled."

John deactivated the energy sword and tucked it back into his thigh pocket, bending to lift the immense pile of armor. It stayed intact and he adjusted it across his shoulder. "They don't weigh all that much, considering," he told her.

The pair of Spartans rejoined the main group; they stirred uneasily when John came into view with his burden but he reassured them that it was quite dead. They stopped to rest the horses and he laid it out on a flat expanse of grass, looking down at it.

Kelly knelt next to the thing's helmet and tried to pry it open, searching for a latch. It came off with a dull sound, but there was nothing inside that either Spartan could identify clearly except several Forerunner symbols.

"Hopefully they didn't tell anyone of our position," she murmured, turning her attention to the energy sword hilt still attached " permanently, it seemed " to the thing's biggest set of arms. "Here, Chief." She tossed him the helmet and lifted the arm, examining the attachment. "I think I can get this off, when we get back. Maybe we should go back for the other two?"

"Not now," John responded, turning the helmet in his hands. "We can come back for it if we need to, but for now, we need to get under cover."

"Roger," Kelly responded, nodding to the group behind them. "Shall we get them moving?"

John tossed the helmet back in answer and she attempted to stick it back on the armor as he went over to where Rebecca was shifting the loads on her stallions. "Rebecca," he said softly to warn her of his coming, knowing that she hated to be surprised by people appearing behind her.

"Hey, John." She smiled and turned slightly, looking up into his visor and shading her eyes from the sun.

"How is everyone holding up?" he asked, casting a glance across the group.

"Well enough. You know, considering." There was fear in her eyes, but she was holding it back; John recognized it in all of them, including Luke. Even Captain Septima had some of the same fear. It was a fear of the unknown. With the war so recently over, the horrors of a glassed planet were fresh on everyone's mind. These new tactics "taking the population instead of merely burning the place from orbit" also frightened them with the strangeness of something different.

"It'll be alright," John told her, making his voice certain.

"Is that Kelly as in Kelly-087?" Rebecca asked, her voice low.

John nodded. "It's a long story, but I've got Fred, Linda, and Kelly back and two Spartan IIIs, Tom and Lucy. We've got eleven Spartans total, and Dr. Halsey, too."

Rebecca, knowing the doctor by reputation and what John had told her about the formidable woman, grinned cockily. "Then we shouldn't have anything to worry about. I'm glad you're here, John. I've been scared." Mutely, John put an arm around her shoulders, which she leaned into gratefully. Unlike most people, she gave and received comfort best by touching someone, though the cold armor wasn't nearly so good as a good personal hug. "It just all happened so fast, when they showed up this morning, and we haven't been able to call anyone for days. We have no idea what's going on, really, only that those things aren't friendly. Porter took his car to town and we haven't seen him since, either."

"They're Forerunner," he told her, gesturing to the pile of inanimate armor with his free hand. "They seem to be rounding up everyone in the cities first and moving out from there. There were three tailing us today, but Kelly and I took them out."

The woman shivered. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

John shook his head in the negative. "Just managed to burn my armor with that sword. Kelly's going to try to get it off to use herself, I think."

"Hmm." Rebecca slid out from under his arm and returned to checking the packs, redistributing them where they had shifted. John let her finish and then looked over the group once more.

"Time to move out," he called over his loudspeakers. No one complained as they moved again; Kelly decided to carry the Forerunner armor this time, slung over her back like an awkward shield with its

larger set of arms over her shoulders.

They hiked until dark, the same terrain that had taken him and Kelly an hour to come down taking a good four hours for the group to climb up. They stopped twice more to rest the older and younger members of the group — the youngest children rode with the eldest adults, but several out-of-shape adults required the rest and were glad of the excuse when the children wanted to get down.

They reached the mine's entrance without further delay, though one goat went missing and was left behind. The rest of the herd, now numbering fifteen, balked at the tunnels and so had to be bodily carried in by the two Spartans and several of the fit adults. Once they were in, however, Rebecca tied them together to keep any from wandering off and put them on a "leash" attached to Chichi's harness.

John consulted his map of the tunnel with Kelly and they traced their return route. Since the tunnels didn't allow more than two people to walk abreast, they agreed to split up to watch the group. John took point and Kelly trailed behind, trying to avoid stepping in horse and goat droppings as much as possible.

They walked another two hours in the semi-darkness relieved only by the Spartans' lights and a few flashlights held by several adults. They remained silent and wary, listening. At a point where the tunnels opened slightly, John halted them and they set up camp, first lighting fires to prepare the first of the rapidly-spoiling ham.

Now in the relative safety of the mines, John removed his helmet and gloves, setting both to one side and then walking among the group, checking for injury and strains. The youngest child was probably eight years old; the eldest adult was nearing eighty, but still spry for her old age.

John knelt next to one of his friends from his year as a civilian, Robert King — not Grandpa Robert — who was struggling to take off his boot and had been limping the past few miles.

"Are you hurt?" John asked, gently taking the man's boot in his hands. Robert hissed softly in pain and nodded.

"Jus' caught it in a damn rabbit hole an' turned my ankle," he answered. "It's swell' into the boot."

John nodded and pried the boot open as gently as possible, trying not to rip it. "Where's Jane?" he asked to distract the man; John hadn't seen Robert's wife in the group yet, but he could have missed her.

"Gone," Robert answered briefly, grief in his voice. "She was in town whenâ€¦ it happened."

"I'm sorry," John said awkwardly, feeling very much like he had just walked straight into that.

Robert's shoulders shook from suppressed emotion and pain. "Do you know where they taken 'em, Chief?" John tried to ignore the stab of pain when one of those he counted among his friends refused to call him by name, but it was insidious. He could see everyone looking

askance at him in his armor; he wasn't John-the-neighbor anymore, now he was the Master Chief, a wholly different creature.

From the medical supplies, Robert had already pulled out a thick elastic wrapping band; John wound it around the man's swollen ankle after checking for broken bones. "I don't know," he answered. "But I plan to find out."

Robert nodded, glancing across the fire at where Kelly was performing the same service for another adult, a slightly older woman who everyone called "Neptune." "Is thatâ€| Another Spartan?" he asked curiously. "I mean, obviously, but I thoughtâ€| You were it."

John shook his head. "There's still the IVs, but she's a II â€" my own generation. Her name's Kelly-087."

Robert looked surprised. "I thought you were the last II we had."

John nodded. "So did I." Robert recognized the relief and happiness in the taller man's voice. "They were stranded three years ago, when we thought they went missing, with Dr. Halsey, Chief Mendez, Tom, and Lucy â€" two Spartan IIIs."

"They? You found more'n Kelly-087 there?"

"Fred-104 and Linda-058," John responded. "There, how's that feel?" The man gingerly set his foot down and nodded, brightening.

"That'll do, Chief. Thanks."

John nodded and moved off, pausing only to survey the scene around him. He stood at the center of the circle of adults and children, near the fire; five were missing, all standing watch so the two Spartans could assess their group of refugees.

Kelly straightened from her position and caught his eyes over the fire. She had removed her helmet as well, her blue eyes glinting in the firelight. Meaningfully, she shook her head slightly; they would be delayed by Neptune's injury at least. John nodded thoughtfully. He would have to decide â€" split up, and risk being ambushed, or stay together and hope nothing followed them into the tunnels?

The two women tending to the dinner sang out that the meat was ready, and Kelly and John removed themselves slightly from the group to talk quietly as everyone crowded around for food.

"Neptune's foot is going to be a bother in the morning," Kelly said without preamble. "I'd put her on a horse, but with these tunnels being so lowâ€|" She sighed, glaring at the ceiling that kept her and John perpetually hunched over. "One of us could carry her, but I'd rather not burden both of us if we get attacked."

John nodded in agreement. "And I don't want to risk splitting the group; for one, they'll be antsy, and for another, that'd only leave one Spartan per group, and if something does attack, I want us both there."

Kelly nodded. "So we'll have to take it slow," she sighed.

"Mind if I join you two?" Rebecca asked, coming out of the group around the fireplace with three bowls in her hands. John immediately shifted over to make room, though Kelly set her jaw. The Chief wasn't quite sure what about Rebecca set his sister on edge, but the woman pretended not to notice and sat down next to John, handing both of them bowls of ham stew.

They ate quickly and efficiently, finishing their bowls of stew before Rebecca thought hers cool enough to eat. She sighed at John, who had the grace to look faintly ashamed, but amusement won out and he grinned. "I see that I'm going to have to teach you your manners again," she told him teasingly.

John chuckled, a deep, rich sound in the tunnels that carried slightly, making a few of the closer adults glance over. Kelly, however, looked insulted, though the difference in her facial expression was minute.

"So, your name's Kelly?" Rebecca turned to the Spartan female, smiling in greeting. "I'm sorry I didn't really get to introduce myself before. I'm Rebecca â€" a friend of John's."

Kelly nodded stiffly. "Kelly-087," she responded. "Spartan II."

"If it's not too prying to ask, what happened to you? I know you went missing three years ago, and John wanted to go looking for you and â€" Fred and Linda, was it?"

Kelly nodded mutely, glancing at John. "We were captured in a Dyson Sphere, after the Covenant overran Onyx and the ONI facility there. A Forerunner ancilla let us out. I thought he was on our side, but after seeing that thing," she waved a hand at the Glowstick armor, "I guess he wasn't." The confusion was evident in her voice to John, but he didn't know if Rebecca would pick up on it.

"And John found you in the Dyson Sphere?"

Kelly shook her head. "On Solstice, in the Alpha Centauri system. Keen Sacrifice â€" that's the ancilla's name â€" got us there. I guess we were supposed to die there, 'cause there were better candidates, but he didn't mention them."

"I'm glad John found you, then." There was real warmth in Rebecca's voice, which Kelly either didn't hear or chose to ignore, because she simply nodded and stood, muttering about going to check on the watches.

Rebecca turned to John with an unhappy sigh. "She's just like you were, except bitter." John raised an eyebrow silently. "You know, with the cold, don't-start-conversations-with-me attitude." That elicited a tight smile from the Spartan. "You've reverted a little," she continued with a quiet sigh. Before he could look at her in surprise, she leaned against his shoulder's armor, her head barely meeting the middle of his upper arm. "I don't think Kelly likes me."

Unsure of how to explain Kelly's big-sister attitude towards him, John settled for shifting so Rebecca was leaning against his chest, one armored arm around her. "The IVs put a notion in her head that you and Iâ€" John trailed off, unsure how to explain just what the



IVs had assumed â€" and convinced Kelly of.

"Had a relationship?" Rebecca finished after a moment of silence. John nodded, uncomfortably aware that his voice carried in the tunnels and unwilling to let Kelly hear him say it. "Well, that's silly. She shouldn't be jealous of me."

John blinked. Jealousy hadn't come into his mind â€" maybe caution, or envy, or worry, but not jealousy. "Besides," Rebecca continued after a brief pause, "I thought you guys didn't have attractions."

John merely shook his head; he didn't want to explain the difference, at least as he saw it, between sexual attraction and relationships. "Go to sleep," he said instead. "We'll keep watch overnight."

"You should sleep, too," Rebecca protested.

"We'll be fine." In reality, John planned on catching a few hours, and having Kelly do the same, but he first wanted to ensure everyone else was resting. The Spartans were used to marching tired, and anyway, they were moving at a very slow pace compared to how quickly the pair had managed to get out here.

"Promise me you'll sleep some, too," Rebecca insisted.

"Alright, I promise." She smiled, content â€" he never broke his promises â€" and set her dirty dishes aside to clean in the morning, shifting against his cold armor. His hand, by contrast, was warm where it brushed her hip as she moved about.

#### 14. Returning to Camp

#### \*\*Chapter 13 â€" Returning to Camp\*\*

John leaned over, gently shaking some of the deeper sleepers awake. "Time to move out," he ordered. The perpetual darkness was clearly affecting those in the room who slept with the sun â€" they woke slowly and groggily, disinclined to get up until the shock of seeing a fully armored Spartan and the smell of the tunnels around them reminded them of the situation.

It was 0600 hours, and most of the company had gotten barely six hours of sleep if they weren't on watch, but he was eager to bring them to a place of greater safety and begin launching offensive attacks. Consolidating a position was usually left to ODSs, who dropped in first, or Marines, not Spartans â€" John and his siblings rarely stayed in or around bases for more than a couple hours.

Maggie and Kadence, the two chefs, were already awake and warming up ham stew for breakfast. The temperature was pleasantly cool but the warm soup was welcome to all, including the Spartans, who had spent the night patrolling alternatively.

After a quick count, John ascertained that no one had gone missing and gave the order to continue on, taking point again as they delved deeper into the mountains and mines. Kelly stayed behind for a few minutes with the most fit of the adults to thoroughly bury the fire

and then followed the group a few meters back, sweeping away their trail and burying the animal feces that littered the tunnels where possible.

The horses were still unhappy about their situation and plodded along with heads bowed under the ceiling, as did the Spartans. Chichi and the goats, however, took the dim tunnels in stride, though Chichi made sure to keep close to Rebecca at all times.

They stopped again around noon at a large puddle that could hold enough clean water to let the horses drink before moving on a short distance to another pool for the humans to drink from. John marked their progress on his map, chafing slightly at the slow pace. The darkness of the tunnels made it easy for several people to trip, and they had several more sprains and complaints. John agreed to allow for an hour's rest for those so injured.

"We need to pick up the pace," Kelly said sourly, putting down the dead Glowstick she had been carrying. "At this rate, we won't be back for another two days."

"We can push them a little," John agreed, "but not much. They can't move as fast as even a basic unit, and I don't want to lose anyone to bad injury or exhaustion if we can help it."

His sister didn't respond, but he could imagine her sigh. She would be perfectly happy to give the group a map and move ahead, but John wasn't willing to risk their lives like that. They hadn't been pursued into the tunnels yet, but with seventy humans in this group, it would make a tasty target for the Glowsticks.

The two Spartans remained on watch as the rest of the group ate their lunch and then rested, most of them taking the chance to take off their boots and let their feet air out a little.

"Let's go," John ordered when an hour had passed. Though a few groaned, no one complained, and all got up relatively quickly. They lined back up, John taking a group to cover the trail behind this time and Kelly on point, and marched. Kelly set a faster pace than John had, so they stopped again at 1400, 1600, 1800, and finally 2000, at which point the children demanded dinner very noisily.

They all ate more of the ham, this time seared in steaks with frying pans, and then John and Kelly pushed them another hour before Rebecca quietly slid back to John's group and pulled him aside.

"John, we can't keep this up," she told him quietly. "We've been walking fast all day â€" the children are being carried, but the adults â€" especially the older folk â€" aren't going to last fifteen more minutes."

John simply nodded. He had known it would be time to stop soon, and called up to Kelly. They came upon the group at the junction of several tunnels, a rounded area large enough to hold all seventy and the horses and goats comfortably.

Kelly was grumpy; John could tell by the set of her head, the way her fingers drummed against her thigh. Silently, he beckoned for her to follow him down a side tunnel, where they could talk face-to-face without being overhead.

"We won't be back until at least noon tomorrow," Kelly ground out as soon as they were far enough away.

"Then we'll have to make do," John told her. "We are marching them to exhaustion, and we can't ask more than that."

There was a certain set to Kelly's jaw that said she wanted to. "You've spent too much time with Spartans," John mused. "Normal soldiers could move slightly faster than this, but even then, we wouldn't get there until tomorrow morning, likely enough. They need their food, rest, and sleep â€" they're only human, Kelly."

"You're babying them," his sister accused.

"No, he's not." Both Spartans turned to see Rebecca, who had come up into earshot, frowning at them both. She came closer, almost â€" not quite â€" glaring at Kelly. "Most of the adults here are in good shape â€" we have to be, to work our ranches and farms â€" but we're not soldiers, and we sure as hell aren't Spartans. This is as good a pace as you're going to get from us, and we're not going to apologize for it." She sounded quite defiant, which almost made John smile, except that Kelly was looking angrier by the second.

"You're walking, on flat terrain â€" or mostly â€" in cool weather, without enemies coming at you, carrying maybe forty kilos of supplies each. If this is the best humanity's average can do, we're a doomed race and Spartans really are the future." John shot his sister a slightly startled glance. He remembered Dr. Halsey, on their induction to the II program, saying something about being the next step in humanity's evolution, but he didn't think she had meant that Spartans would replace unaugmented humans.

But Rebecca merely shook her head. "As I said, I won't apologize for it. It's as good as we can do, especially when we have older folk and children with us."

Kelly snorted, glanced at John, and turned away, sliding her helmet on again before sprinting off; John sighed slightly, glancing at Rebecca. "She's mad," he said by way of explanation.

"She can't run from the problem," the woman muttered, glancing up at John. "Aren't you going to go after her?"

"She'll run off some energy and come back when she's ready â€" but she won't go far," he told her, smiling slightly.

Rebecca shook her head, but she smiled fondly. "You always did like to work out your problems physically."

"It's a Spartan thing." The green light in his helmet blinked â€" an incoming message. "I have to take this," he told Rebecca, slipping the helmet on. His HUD blinked to life; Cortana appeared in the upper corner.

"John," she said by way of greeting. "I've established safe communications on this channel â€" and this channel only â€" with Dr. Halsey's help. How's it going?"

"We have found a group of seventy survivors and are bringing them,

thirteen horses, fifteen goats, and several dogs " and as much in the way of supplies as we could carry " to the camp. We managed to kill three Glowsticks on the way, and have brought the most intact specimen back with us for Dr. Halsey's examination. We are fifteen miles out and will be there around noon tomorrow."

"Very good," Dr. Halsey answered, her voice coming through the radio. "And did you find Rebecca?" The question made John uncomfortably aware of how well the doctor knew him " and how obvious he was about his attachment to the civilian woman still standing at his elbow.

"Yes," he answered shortly.

"Excellent. If you would like, I will prepare a separate tent for you-"

"Thank you, ma'am, but that's not necessary," John assured her quickly, reminding himself to make very clear that he was in no way romantically involved with Rebecca to all of his team, since the IVs, at least, seemed to be so attached to the idea. He was glad the woman in question hadn't heard Dr. Halsey's comment, too.

"Ah, I see." There was a small amount of sadness and " Regret? Guilt? John couldn't identify what was behind Dr. Halsey's voice, but something made him want to assure her that it wasn't her fault for " whatever it was that was bothering her.

"What about the other teams?" John asked. No one had reported any problems at last night's check-in, but neither had they had any communication since then.

"Fred's team found several families hidden around their town, and are bringing them back " but they didn't have any pack animals and are not carrying as much supplies as they would like. Lazlakovic has only a handful of survivors, and they were lucky enough to be in an area with working mines, so they are bringing a lot of supplies with the mules and ore carts " old fashioned, but since nothing with a power source larger than a laptop seems to be working, it'll have to do. Naomi found no one, even in the rural houses, so they're bringing back supplies only. N'hamee's team found some humans, but they ran at the Sangheili's approach and could not be tempted to follow them to safety, so they left them some supplies and a map to the cave and came back as quickly as possible " I only hope it doesn't fall into the Glowsticks' hands."

John nodded in agreement. "We're going to be back last," he estimated.

"Don't push anyone past their limits. I'd rather you arrive late than with a bunch of exhausted civilians." This time, it was Captian Septima speaking. "There's nothing worse for morale than exhausted civvies crying around the place" Sir," she added belatedly.

Kelly's green light, signaling that she was ready for human interaction again, caught John's attention. "Then we'll report again in the morning," he told the three females on the radio.

"Be safe," Cortana told him, severing the radio connection. John

looked down at Rebecca, who was still waiting patiently.

Kelly appeared then, coming out of the tunnel's darkness without her headlights on, before John could speak. She glanced at Rebecca coldly and turned to John to report. "Nothing that way for four kilometers, sir," she said, as though she had run a simple scouting sortie.

"You ran four â€" no, eight â€"kilometers in that much time?" Rebecca asked, clearly stunned. "That was \_maybe\_ fifteen minutes."

"Sixteen minutes and twenty-eight seconds," Kelly corrected her. "Not my fastest time, but it was dark."

Rebecca just shook her head wordlessly, a sardonic smile curving her lips upward. "John told me you were the fastest Spartan, but damn." At this, Kelly glanced at her brother, both surprised and annoyed that he had told the woman about his sister's speed.

The three rejoined the main group, which had huddled around the two fireplaces and left a large area open. While Rebecca sat down next to Luke to get some food, John looked at the Forerunner armor thoughtfully.

"Here, hold this," he told Kelly, picking up the armor and handing it to her so that she shadowed it, her hands under the larger arm's joints to the torso. The clunk it made as she lifted it off the ground made most of the adults turn quickly, and they watched in curiosity as John settled into a defensive stance. Picking up his intention, Kelly set her feet to brace the armor and shifted her grip slightly so its back was braced against her chest.

John punched the thing's chest plate directly in the middle as hard as he could, once. Kelly, braced for the hit, didn't budge, but the plate dented slightly. He stepped back and they both looked at the indent, unhappy. "That's not going to do it, and they won't hold still for us to deliver that kind of punch," Kelly said. "And you just dented Dr. Halsey's new toy."

"Dents aren't going to hurt the Forerunner symbols, and she'll be able to read them," he said dismissively. They were speaking through their speakers so everyone in the group heard them. "Can you power up its sword?" Kelly turned her attention to its wrist but found no obvious \_on\_ button, so she twisted it this way and that until it suddenly flashed to life, nearly burning its own leg. The energy crackling along the orange blade's length made the air around it hot and smell of ozone.

John pulled his own blue energy sword from his thigh pocket and snapped it to life easily, bringing it close to the orange one. The two energy sources meeting sparked an increase in light and heat, lighting up the cavern. "Can you cut through its wrist?" Kelly asked, holding out the arm to make such a cut possible. "I want this thing before we give it to Dr. Halsey, in case more of these Glowsticks are following us."

The Chief nodded, slicing cleanly through the armor a few centimeters above the wrist to preserve the power source and whatever activated the sword. Kelly tossed aside the rest of the armor and carefully took a hold of the wrist awkwardly. She brandished the sword a few times, testing it. "It'll do," she announced, "but I'll have to make

some sort of handle for it, or I might cut off my own hand." She chuckled slightly, likely remembering the loss of her pinky, and twisted the wrist around in her hand until the sword flashed back to inactivity.

John deactivated his sword as well, putting it back in his pocket, and crouched next to the pile of Forerunner armor. "It doesn't have shields," he said quietly.

"Doesn't need 'em," Kelly countered, glancing at her own forearm guard that included a Jackal-like shield. "Whatever that material is, it's tough. It scraped your armor." John, holding up his hand, saw that she was right â€" the small panels protecting his fingers between the knuckles were scratched. He hadn't put his shields up since entering the tunnel.

The pair left the armor and rejoined the group just long enough to get some amused glances â€" mostly directed at John, since most of the adults there knew him at least by reputation from the others as John-the-neighbor â€" and dinner before removing themselves again to patrol, instructing everyone to get some sleep before the morning's push.

\_~~Next morning~~\_

John was dozing more than sleeping, aware of it when the prone forms around him shifted in their deeper sleep. Kelly was on watch with two other adults, but he wasn't willing to fully relax. The embers of the fire were glowing as the Spartan opened his eyes, his internal clock telling him it was 0600. He nearly stood when he remembered that Rebecca was leaning against his left side and would fall if he moved, so he gently lowered her to the ground without waking her, tucking her hair under her head as a pillow. Only then did he rise and step carefully over her sleeping body towards the fire, thinking to build it up before waking everyone up.

"Where're you goin'?" Rebecca asked, her voice quiet not from caution but sleep as she sat up. "Is something wrong?" She was becoming more alert by the minute, and the sound of her voice had woken a couple other adults.

"No," John answered quickly, setting a log gently on the coals and removing his helmet to blow into its heart. "But it is time to wake up."

Rebecca nodded and slowly crawled out of her sleeping bag, shivering slightly as her heated skin met the cool air of the tunnel. She had slept without socks, in shorts and a T-shirt, and her feet protested the shock of cold tunnel dirt.

Kelly, hearing the commotion â€" quiet as it was â€" as the rest of the adults started stirring and waking their neighbors, came back to report in and let the watch eat breakfast.

John put on his helmet again and was immediately treated to a picture sent from Kelly's helmet camera of Rebecca sleeping against his side, his arm laying over her sleeping bag and looking to be holding her close. With his helmet on, it was impossible to read his expression, but John knew what it would have looked like. That kind of calm was only possible around his civilian friend. From the angle, Kelly had

taken it during one of her patrols through the group's camp.

Without speaking, Kelly had made her concern clear. Over the private channel, she asked quietly, "Was it worth giving up everything you knew?" Since he didn't know the answer, and didn't want to make one, John remained silent. Kelly shook her head in reproof and removed her helmet, giving him a glance before picking up a bowl of breakfast stew and finding a place to sit.

John kept his helmet on, however, and reported stoically to Cortana that they would be leaving in an hour to give the group time to eat, clean up, change, and organize their supplies. She estimated their arrival time based on their progress so far as being closer to 1100 hours than noon. The AI knew there was something off in his voice, but when she asked if there was anything else to report, he denied it and shut off the radio link with a last set of instructions to Captain Septima that included an order to find "or make" a space large enough for the Spartans to spar in as quickly as it could be managed.

After an hour of unpacking, repacking, and changing clothing, the group was in a better mood and eager to reach this safe haven. Kelly, on point, led the charge into the darkness, while John trailed the group and carried the Forerunner armor. They stopped twice on the way to rest and drink from underground springs purified with iodine droplets everyone in the mountains carried on hikes.

For the last leg, John took point and led the group into the large cavern, coming out of the tunnel and into the slightly more illuminated cavern with several sighs of relief from the group behind him. In his absence, another thirty square feet of floor had been cleared, and this was clearly set up as a drilling and sparring area, with a couple sets of well-dented Forerunner armor already stacked there to practice on, held up like scarecrows on poles.

More floodlights accounted for the increase in light, probably thanks to one of the other supply groups. Though the hardware store had had such lamps, they had been low on John's priority list and therefore left behind.

John jumped down the thirty feet to the floor again, still unwilling to trust the rickety stairs, but the group of seventy eagerly marched down them and clustered at their end. Several adults already in residence, recognizing friends or just eager to see fresh faces, came closer, as did most of the children throughout the camp.

Captain Septima was waiting for them with a team of ten at-attention soldiers, a show of force to comfort the refugees. They all struck salutes. "Master Chief, sir," Captain Septima greeted when he returned the gesture.

"Organize our new guests and find them lodging, Captain," John ordered. Kelly, her group safely down in the cavern, jumped down next to him, her armor clanging against the Forerunner's that she carried. The soldiers behind Septima stirred uneasily but, recognizing the lack of glow for death, calmed quickly. "We'll debrief in thirty."

"Yes, sir. Your teams are all back; you're the last ones in. Glowstick movements have been quiet around here."

With the informal report out of the way, John and Kelly headed for the Spartan's tents and the captain turned to the refugees. "Welcome to Haven," she said to the group of seventy, drawing their attention. "There are some rules here that you should be aware of before you get settled."

When the pair got to the edge of the area designated as the Spartans', they found the IVs, Fred, IIIs, and Elites sitting in the dirt in the circle, talking quietly but attentively. Fred spotted them first " and their burden " and stood to salute, followed quickly by the rest. John dismissed the salute before they could all come to attention, however, and pulled off his helmet. "Where's Dr. Halsey?" he asked.

"In her tent, sir," Fred answered, pointing behind himself.

John nodded and took the armor from Kelly, heading for the tent. Kelly joined the group sitting on the ground. Everyone noted the obvious coolness between the normally close pair, but no one commented as they resumed the discussion with a quick summary for their comrade.

"Ma'am?" John called, lacking a door to knock on.

"Come in, John," Dr. Halsey invited. The Spartan ducked " really ducked " through the tent's opening and nearly walked into the doctor where she was seated on a camp stool in front of a tiny desk that held a laptop " likely the Captain's " and a small holographic projector. She chuckled. "Careful there. It's cramped in here."

"We can find you a larger tent," John offered, trying not to imagine sleeping in something so small in his armor. A cot in one corner took up nearly half of the available space, and he leaned it upright to give himself room to step fully into the tent. The walls were thick canvas and would keep their conversation at least muffled from the sharp-eared Spartans and Elites outside.

"No, no. I'm perfectly fine. You and that armor take up a lot of room." She smiled and motioned for him to sit next to her. He carefully knelt, straightening his back out gratefully so his head was just above hers. "Now, before we get to the obvious, would you like to tell me why you and Kelly seem to be at odds, shall we say?"

The doctor had likely heard both of them return and the lack of communication between Kelly and John, and drawn her own conclusions. Or Kelly had radioed in to speak to her directly. She also knew her Spartans well, and could tell John was annoyed about something that had to do with his sister.

"And take your helmet off," Dr. Halsey said before John could think of how to phrase Kelly's apparent jealousy in a way that didn't implicate that it had any true founding. He did so, knowing she preferred to speak face-to-face and not face-to-visor. It also gave her the opportunity to read his expressions, which, having become freer after a year as a civilian and then the weeks training with DT and IVs, made him slightly less uncomfortable than it used to.



"We rescued seventy survivors from Yuray and brought them along with us on the way back. The going was slower than Kelly is used to, and she was eager to return to being our offensive tactics."

"And she's not speaking to you because you were slowed down by refugees?" Obviously, the doctor wasn't going to believe that.

"No, ma'am, but it did account for her increased agitation. One of the members of the group is a good friend of mine, Rebecca."

"So you said." Cortana suddenly appeared on the doctor's desk, her hologram hardly as large as John's hand, but she said nothing, clearly just interested in the proceedings and willing to listen. "And Kelly disapproves of this friendship, I take it."

"I believe so," John answered slowly. "Rebecca says Kelly is jealous, but I've never seen her jealous before. She seems to be worried that I will forget my duty in favor of a civilian life."

"If only," the doctor murmured. John blinked in surprise and Dr. Halsey's face softened. She reached forward to touch his cheek, an oddly maternal gesture that made him uncomfortable. Sensing this, she removed her hand.

"The changes I have seen in you since our reunion have been comforting, John," she said seriously. "I firmly believe Rebecca was a large part of those changes, and an incredible force in your life. Cortana agrees with my assessment that the attitude adjustment, the exposure to normalcy, has only strengthened your leadership abilities, natural empathy, and resolve. These cannot be bad things." She paused and John waited, sensing she had more to say, though what she had already said was rocking his foundations.

"Moreover, Kelly cannot appreciate these because she was trained to respond to your original leadership style and though you are still very much capable of leading Spartans, you are better suited now to leading much more varied groups, including ones with Sangheili, I understand. It is not a bad thing, but your brother and sister sense the change. Both are worried that they will become obsolete if they cannot make this change as well, and both are more resistant to change than you ever were. Spartans are stubborn, but those two—" She chuckled, likely at some memory of them as children. "Plus, John, Kelly and Fred love you. They don't want to see you hurt, even if they don't acknowledge that fear or its source."

John frowned slightly. "I do not believe Rebecca could or would, I know" hurt me," he objected.

"Not physically, John; not even intentionally. If she were to die, would you be able to forgive yourself for her death?"

That was a serious question, and one John did know the answer to. "No," he answered softly.

Dr. Halsey nodded. "That vulnerability is something that every soldier except a Spartan has. It is one that we severed when we took you as children and raised you to expect defend against, yes, but expect the death of loved ones and comrades. It is something you now possess, and though Fred and Kelly don't understand it

intellectually, instinctively, they know you have a weakness now that they did not see in you before. More importantly, they know they cannot protect you from it " and you will not sever all emotional ties to Rebecca to protect yourself. If you could." That last was added thoughtfully as Dr. Halsey looked carefully at John.

The Spartan frowned. He disapproved of his own weaknesses, and disliked the idea that another had been added almost without his approval. However, thinking of the year spent as a civilian, he acknowledged that the doctor was right " he wouldn't be able to forget Rebecca, ever.

"I won't insult you or your training by asking if you can keep your head in the game, as it were," she continued. "But this is a kind of distraction you have never had to contend with, and I want you to know that I am always available if you have concerns about your performance or your team's."

"You have never been dishonest in your assessments," John pointed out. "Thank you, ma'am."

"John, I have to ask you a serious question," Dr. Halsey said after a moment of silence between them. "And before you answer, I want you to really think about it. This isn't a test, and there isn't a right answer, but you need to be completely honest with all three of us." Her gesture included Cortana, herself, and him; John nodded, wondering what the doctor was about to ask. "Barring our current situation, would you like living the rest of your life as a civilian, with no ties to the UNSC but those friends you have made in her service?"

John almost answered immediately in the negative, but remembering Dr. Halsey's warning to think about his answer before giving it, he bit back his immediate reaction and thought carefully. For her sake, though she likely knew exactly what was going through his head, he spoke aloud as he traced the pathway of his answer. "Even a year ago, I would have said no " and meant it," he said softly, looking at the tabletop. "My first impulse is that I would hate civilian life. I was raised to be a Spartan " to be a soldier. I enjoy military discipline, protecting humanity and our new allies. It's my duty, but it's also something I like doing because I know how to do it. And I do it well." That wasn't a boast " in fact, Cortana almost interrupted to correct him.

"But after a year of civilian life" He shook his head. "I do not want it, intellectually, because I know my duty as a Spartan, as a human. But when I heard that Earth was in trouble, that we didn't know where 99% of our population is, much less if they are even alive" I felt regret." He looked at Dr. Halsey, still struggling to come to terms with that flash of feeling after seeing the orange flag on the map over Yuray.

"Regret for what, John?" the woman gently probed when he fell silent, trying to find the words. She didn't try to guess, leaving him to work it out for himself " as she had all his life.

"Missed opportunities," the Chief finally answered, his voice confused. "I stopped it automatically, but there was a moment" When I thought of what could have been, if I hadn't left Earth with the fleet. Could I have protected Rebecca?" He shook his head. "Likely

not. Even as a Spartan, these Glowsticks are tough opponents. I would have been taken with all the rest."

Dr. Halsey stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "You're being intellectual, John," she told him. "Instincts â€" what were your \_instincts\_ telling you?"

"I cannot see myself as a civilian with a family like I think you mean, doctor, but I can see myself as a civilian," he finally said. "The IVs talk about their families, who they were or are so attached to â€" but I don't feel that way towards Rebecca, or anyone but Kelly and Fred, anymore. I don't want that kind of relationship with Rebecca. I prefer the friendship we share. And I would like it to continue, if it were possible. But it isn't, and I am not only willing but eager to continue as the Master Chief."

Dr. Halsey watched him closely after that admission, smiling faintly. "I am sorry you don't want to be a family man, John," she said after a moment. "And I hope that Rebecca has not formed expectations or hopes to that effect. It is something that we trained out of you that I wish we had left alone, even if you would have been unstable as teenagers. The ability to make deep ties like that â€" not the bonds you call kinship with your fellow Spartans â€" is something that is vital to humanity's continuance, and it is why I was wrong all those years ago. You are not the future of humanity. It has taken me years to see that. Our future lies in peace, not war."

"And we are war," John said quietly, bringing up a hand to look closely at his armor. The green sheen didn't reflect his face â€" it hadn't been polished since leaving Solstice â€" but it held memories, death and destruction as though written in words.

Dr. Halsey nodded. "If you all survive these final battles against the Glowsticks and the Brutes, I will do everything in my power to rectify the mistakes I made â€" and reconcile with you and your siblings."

John, however, shook his head. "I adjusted, Dr. Halsey, but it was a long andâ€| painfulâ€| process. Kelly and Fred are Spartans, and they're stubborn. They do not want to leave the UNSC." He was quiet for a moment, then murmured, "And I will not leave them."

"A noble ambition, John, but when the funding for the Spartan program falls out as more money is allocated towards rebuilding and peace, not war, where will you and your siblings go?"

"It is a moot question at the moment," Cortana broke in. "I calculate our chances of survival to be dwindling by the day. I cannot reach the fleet, nor even any bases or stations in orbit."

This turned the conversation neatly from uncomfortable topics â€" at least for John â€" and to their current situation. The doctor let the topic change, sitting up straighter and pushing her glasses up on her nose. "Well, first, I would like to examine this Glowstick," she told John, looking at the Forerunner armor. "And your recordings of your battle, and Kelly's, if possible." John nodded and handed her his helmet so she could transfer the necessary files, promising to send Kelly in as he carefully and awkwardly side-walked back out of the tent, leaving the Forerunner armor for the doctor to look at.

He trooped back to the circle of Spartans â€" the three Elites having disappeared â€" and tapped Kelly on the shoulder. "Dr. Halsey would like to see your recordings of the Glowsticks," he told her.

"Yes, sir," she answered. Her anger had cooled, but there was still a slight frost on the tone as she stood and ducked into the tent.

John wanted to wait for her to emerge again, to speak to her, but he knew Captain Septima was waiting for the formal debriefing â€" and he needed to begin plans for an offensive attack sometime soon, before the Glowsticks could get used to the Spartans' presence.

Beckoning for Lazlakovic to join him, John headed for the command tent. With the influx of new supplies, someone had taken the time to fully encase the large area that had previously only been covered with tarps and ringed in a dirt trench. Captain Septima and two of her underlings were waiting.

## 15. Laying Plans

### \*\*Chapter 14 â€" Laying Plans\*\*

"Master Chief." Captain Septima snapped to attention as John ducked through the opening past the pair of guards â€" who likely served more as messengers â€" and entered the warm "room."

"At ease," John said, approaching the map table. Captain Septima, already having heard the briefs from the other teams that had left, had adjusted the marks around their positions. There was more yellow around small neighborhoods and even at several single houses, though there was no way to tell if the occupants had gone into hiding or been taken.

John added his own report to the mix, putting up purple markers to mark areas that he could call reasonable cleared of refugees and changing a few other tags to that color. The area they had cleared was pitifully small.

"We will need to engage more search-and-rescue teams," Captain Septima murmured thoughtfully. "But with your group, Chief, we're out of space â€" and more cramped than I would like. If Glowsticks came here, we couldn't maneuver. We need to find something bigger â€" we can't dig much more without risking collapse."

John nodded. "Has anyone managed to penetrate into a city yet, or get into a base?" he asked, thinking of the large underground bunkers in all of the military stations on Earth.

However, the two underlings shook their heads before the captain could even answer. "It's a trap," one said. He limped, quite clearly retired due to injury, but his mind was as sharp as ever. "Anyone who goes near a city gets taken almost immediately. They want to keep those cities. I think the same goes for a base, but we haven't tried."

John nodded, ignoring the slight irregularity of having the Petty Officer answer for the Captain. "We will have to find more caverns such as this one. Surely Cortana has access to geographic surveys of this area and can use them to locate more possibilities."

"Aye, but I dislike splitting us up," Captain Septima said grimly. "If we split down the middle and left half our strength in each camp â€" or whatever portion â€" we could lose that portion before reinforcements could arrive. The Glowsticks work fast, sir. And if we concentrated all of our military in one area, we might not be able to come to an encampment's rescue in time."

It was a puzzle, certainly, and John frowned slightly, looking over the map. "Without vehicles, we cannot move supplies or troops quickly â€" in the tunnels or outside them. Has your mechanic had any success in repairing any of the downed equipment so far?"

"No, sir, and likely won't. He says something fried everything so badly it's all scrap now. How something could do that to the machines when it didn't fry us, too, I don't know, but it's happened. Nothing larger than a good-sized laptop survived, which means all of Earth's machinery is dead in the water. Your armor probably would have been shorted if you had been here for the initial pulse, or whatever it was."

John nodded in agreement. He didn't like to think he could be rendered completely useless with a wave. "Any contact from any AIs yet?" he asked. He knew that would have been one of Cortana's priorities.

"No, sir, not even on our secured channel," Captain Septima said dismally. "Cortana thinks they may still be alive, merely trapped in their memory chips if they were able to leave the affected systems before the pulse shut them down, but we aren't sure."

"Very well. Have her and Dr. Halsey keep trying to establish communication. In the meantime, we need to discuss patrols, watches, and supply runs. How many fit adults do you have in the camp?"

"With the group you just brought us, sir, one hundred and thirty-four fit and able adults, plus thirty-four retired personnel who have been good for training up the civvies."

"How many have combat or scouting training?"

Captain Septima shook her head. "Not many, sir. Few of us retired for anything less than grave injury. I think the count is forty-three, including myself."

"We will need to ensure at least two or three of them are with every group we send out. Now that we have a good amount of supplies, I would like to assemble everyone in the camp for a briefing. Your rule set is a good one, but we will need more order and discipline here if we are to survive until the fleet reaches us."

"This is a civilian camp for the most part, Chief," Captain Septima said uneasily. "They won't respond well to marching orders. They like their spontaneity."

John shook his head slightly. "We need clear avenues, lines of defense and attack, should our camp be discovered. Escape and evacuation plans, especially â€" in case of an attack, disorder would be our worst enemy in these quarters."

Captain Septima nodded. "Shall I call a meeting for after dinner? Hungry civvies don't make good listeners, unfortunately."

John nodded, grateful for the advice. "I want everyone there except the watchers â€" call in the scouts you can."

Captain Septima nodded. "Roger, sir." She motioned to an aide standing just at the edge of the tent and gave the necessary orders, which sent him dashing away to find people to carry the message to the scouts.

They continued with a few of the everyday tasks of running such a camp. With gentle hints, Captain Septima managed to make up for John's lack of experience in this area. The hours wore on towards dinner time as they continued; John sent Lazlakovic back to the Spartan camp with orders to have everyone see to their armor in order to prepare for their next mission.

Dr. Halsey came to make a report on her findings of the Forerunner armor at 1700 hours, when the camp was bustling about making dinner. She gave John back his helmet as well, which he set on the table. "It's definitely not made of anything I can recognize," she said bluntly. "While I may not have advanced laboratory access here, I can tell that the material is very strong and resists scratches from everything under a 10 on the Mohs scale. Furthermore, the symbols on the armor appear to be related to those we have studied before, on the various Forerunner artifacts we've found, but they may be much older. I cannot decipher some, but the rest seem to indicate that whatever powers or inhabits the armor â€" and Cortana believes it is the latter â€" is not organic but mechanical in body, yet somehow organic as well."

"Have you catalogued its weaknesses?" John asked, forestalling the inevitable monologue that could have gone on if unchecked.

The doctor smiled ruefully. "What few it has," she said. "The dent you left in its chest plate was impressive, considering the thickness of armor there â€" likely because the chest is a target for any predator. The joints may prove your best targets, and it is clearly vulnerable to your energy sword. I noticed its wrist had been sliced off and Kelly admits she kept the Glowstick's own energy sword. I would like to compare the two, if possible."

John nodded and handed over the sword from his thigh pocket. Dr. Halsey held it briefly, surprised slightly by the weight of it, and then tucked it into a bag she had apparently requisitioned from someone. "If that's all, I'll be going." They nodded in agreement and let her go, turning back to their original problem â€" finding, and housing, more refugees while mounting a counter-attack.

"If we assume the captured civilians are being kept on these ships we cannot find on any instruments currently available to us, we must make every effort to secure something space-worthy to find them," John mused after a few moments of silence with the end of assigning shifts to scouting teams. "Without communications, intel, or even knowledge of what is attacking usâ€" We're in a bad situation here." He crossed his arms, looking down at the table-sized map of the world with its red and yellow pins. "If we could manage to land an attack team in their base, it is possible we'd find what is actually behind those Glowsticks â€" the soldiers Kelly and I fought weren't smart

enough to be leading any sort of invasion â€" and capture them. But getting there would be difficult."

"Chief, getting there would mean getting captured," the captain said bluntly. "And you're CO, so that's not gonna fly. We should be consolidating our strength, finding and protecting what we can on the ground â€" if the fleet sent you here, surely they're on their own way. You took two weeks to get here; they'll take a lot longer. All we can do is sit and wait."

"If they were in a position to return, Admiral Hood's message would have been clearer." John shook his head. "Whatever hit Earth must have incapacitated the fleet â€" or the Brutes did it. Either way, I'm not expecting backup, which means we'll have to manage this ourselves."

"All the more reason to save as many lives as we can, not throw Spartans into God knows what situation â€" if the Glowsticks take you to the others and don't kill you off the bat or decide to take you somewhere else. For all we know, everyone we think is on the ships could be dead, or on an alien planet far, far away."

Frustrated, John leaned gently on the table. "Captain, these soldiers can secure this area for now. I have no doubt the Glowsticks could easily overrun us if they so choose, especially if they come in waves as you described happening in our biggest population centers. The same tunnels that would cramp them into small, easily-dispatched groups similarly hinder my team and I, and no one else has energy swords or guns anymore. We need to take a military complex." He looked down at the map and fiddled with the controls until it highlighted all of the military bases of sufficient size to house the refugees around them. "With a concentrated attack, we could take one back."

Captain Septima sighed quietly. "I can't countermand your orders, Chief, only counsel you with the intel we do have. If you think we'll be safer in a military base, we'll do our damndest to capture one â€" but I don't know how many soldiers you're willing to sacrifice to the cause."

"None," John answered immediately. "My team and I will take the base."

Now the captain eyed him suspiciously. "Eleven Spartans will take on what could be an army of Glowsticks, secure a base, and hold defensive lines until we can move in with nearly three hundred civilians, livestock, and supplies?"

"Your soldiers will be needed to carry those supplies and herd the civilians as quickly as possible," John explained, leaning forward.

"Sirs, if I mayâ€¦" A young man appeared at the tent flap. "Dinner has been served, and I know you, at least, haven't had lunch." He glared slightly at Captain Septima, who scoffed but glanced over his shoulder hungrily.

"We'll continue our briefing tomorrow," John ordered, pulling on his helmet.

"Chief, if I may have a word?" Captain Septima was hanging back as everyone else filed out of the tent; John turned back silently. They waited until they were alone, and then the woman shuffled in a slightly awkward way before saying quickly, "I understand that your training is far beyond my own, Chief, but I can't help but notice several irregularities between how you do things and how a typical operation like this would be carried out." John nodded, waiting for more. "You seeâ€¦ you're used to the rigid discipline you get from your Spartans, and taking orders that would be impossible for anyone else to carry out. Civilians and regular companies aren't like that. We'll take our orders from you, sir, but I am responsible for every soldier and civilian in this cavern, sir, and I don't like to see theâ€¦ cavalier attitude your Spartans display applied to them."

John was silent for a moment before taking his helmet off again, tucking it under one arm. "You're right," he said to forestall the captain from speaking when she opened her mouth. "I've never led a civilian camp, and the few bases I have helped set up were in the middle of war zones, staffed with soldiers, not civilians â€" and especially not children or expecting mothers. I took the orders then; I didn't make them."

"And, sir, if it's not too insubordinate to say, you Spartans are used to taking \_shitty\_ orders."

John smirked slightly. "That's true," he admitted. "Very well, Captain, what do you suggest?"

"Give me back command of the camp," she said immediately, standing slightly straighter. "I can manage the day-to-day activities, the scouting and such, and I can pass intel on to you and your team. I like your idea to take a base, sir, I just don't know how it could be done."

John mulled this over. The commander in a camp didn't go on missions â€" they ran the camp. He wanted â€" needed â€" to be with his Spartans. Captain Septima's proposed plan had many advantages, both for the Spartans and the camp. "Give us enough supplies for a week and we'll scout out the nearest base. From there, we'll have to decide based on our intel â€" and what the Glowsticks do in the meantime. This will be a joint command, Captain," he finished.

Captain Septima struck a salute, which the Chief returned. "Alright, now that that's over and you didn't pummel me into the ground, it's time to eat," she said jovially. He preceded her out of the tent and turned towards the Spartan camp immediately, but the woman gently steered him â€" by means of pointing, since she couldn't have budged him if she tried â€" towards the other end of camp. "Everyone eats communally," she explained.

John just nodded in understanding and, keeping his helmet tucked under his arm, followed her to the dinner line. They received a large plate of food each, mostly beans and a slab of ham with some green things that appeared to be canned green beans. Taking a set of silverware and some irregularly-shaped rolls from a basket set out on a table, the pair went to find seats amongst the adults sitting in the roads between the tents.



As he carefully wound his way through the press, John realized this was another weakness to the camp " with everyone so close together, no one could move. If he had to run, or couldn't take the time to avoid everyone's fingers at least, he could badly injure someone accidentally.

"We'll have to devise some sort of eating space," John commented to Septima as they sat in a group made of the other Spartans and some of Septima's underlings. "This press makes it difficult to maneuver, if we're attacked."

"Does your brain ever stop doing that?" the captain wondered aloud, mouth full of food.

"Stop doing what?" John asked, perplexed and allowing the familiarity, though it would have made him uncomfortable prior to meeting the IVs.

"Analyzing the situation for weaknesses and threats," one of the aides clarified as the captain tried to chew through a tough bit of meat, waving at her subordinate to reply.

John tilted his head, as did Kelly and Fred, sitting opposite him in the ring. The IVs, lying on the bellies and already having eaten, perked up slightly to listen in, as did Tom and Lucy from where they sat just a few feet away in their own counsel. John didn't know where the Sangheili were, or what they were managing to eat " the beans would have made for a very difficult dinner for creatures without a lower palette to their mouths.

"It's how we were trained," Fred answered, shrugging. "I guess it becomes habit, after a while." He turned to John. "Dr. Halsey had an interesting discussion with Kelly," he said nonchalantly, though Kelly's eyes immediately narrowed.

John raised an eyebrow, looking at Kelly silently. Sighing, the female Spartan explained. "About my attitude." The aides, Captain Septima, IVs, and IIIs were all confused, but John nodded in understanding. Dr. Halsey had clearly talked to the woman about her response to Rebecca's presence " and John's friendliness. "Sorry, Chief. Won't happen again."

John nodded acceptance. "And if it does, I'll find a Warthog for you to bench-press a few times." Kelly groaned in good-natured agreement, and Fred snorted.

"As if," one of the aides muttered. Kelly, hearing the remark, glanced at the young woman, but merely smiled.

"I'm thinking we should spar after dinner," the female Spartan said, turning back to John. "All of us " and maybe some of the more fit civilians, too. Couldn't hurt."

John shook his head. "I'm addressing the camp tonight, about our current arrangements," he told her. "After that, we can spar " but no civilians. Their training is up to Captain Septima."

"Say, Chief, when do we get energy swords?" Carter asked, propping himself up on his elbows. "You've got one, and Kelly's got that

Forerunner one, but the rest of us are kind of weaponless against those Glowsticks. I'm out of ammo for my rifle, and they don't respond well to being hit." He held up his bandaged hand, which John hadn't noticed immediately. "Just a busted knuckle, but damn if it doesn't hurt punching them in the face."

"There are two more back in Yuray if you'd like to go find them," Kelly told him, "and drag them back here for Dr. Halsey." Carter frowned, doubting he could make it there and back within a reasonable amount of time.

"We'll have to scavenge them from our next targets," John said, addressing the group at large. "The energy swords work well against them, but their second pair of arms â€" and the other large arm â€" can be tricky to remember to guard against if you're concentrating on their sword."

It took nearly an hour for everyone to move through the dinner line and eat; by 1900 hours, however, everyone except the next watch shift was arranged so they could see the staircase, at the top of which John stood with Captain Septima and several aides. John turned on his loudspeakers to address the assembled group.

"The threat we are facing is one we cannot identify. We don't know what our enemies want, or why they have taken most of our population. We face extinction. Our resources are limited. To ensure, as best we can, our continued existence, this camp must be ready for an attack at all times. Soldiers need clear lines to move through in case of an emergency. Everyone will be assigned to an evacuation group â€" if it becomes necessary to abandon this base, that group will be your lifeline. Rosters will be posted by breakfast.

"Tomorrow, we will organize this camp by shifts so that every able-bodied adult will receive combat and survival training. We will build supply caches along every escape route â€" I would like volunteers for that duty to report to Captain Septima within the hour. Within the next week, we will hold an evacuation drill to ensure a smooth operation in case of an emergency.

"No one is to leave the camp without a guard. If you are found by the Glowsticks, it is imperative that you do not return here. If possible, hide â€" someone will have noticed your absence and we will come find you. If not, submit quietly and do not attack â€" we must assume they are holding their prisoners aboard their ships, and we will come rescue you when it becomes a possibility.

"Captain Septima is in command of the camp and all soldiers herein. My Spartans and I will only use this base as a rendezvous point while we plan an attack on a nearby military base. When we have captured and reinforced the base, you will be moved to new quarters. Until then, continue on with your duties."

John quitted the field, letting Captain Septima step up and begin calling out the roster lists, assigned groups to various tasks throughout the camp for tomorrow. His Spartans and the Elites were waiting for him, enough supplies packed to see them through a week's surveillance and, hopefully, conquering. They had clearly given up the thought of sparring in favor of leaving early and hopefully getting out of the camp, which smelled like humans â€" sweat, excrement, and despair gave the air a tang no one liked.

Before leaving, however, the Chief had one more errand to run, and ducked into Dr. Halsey's tent to do it. She wasn't surprised by his silent entrance, though he had forgotten to request permission to enter, and she turned around, holding a towel around her slim figure, clearly just coming back from the showers.

"Sorry, ma'am," John said immediately, turning his back politely.

"No, John, it's fine. I heard the rest of the team preparing to leave and wanted to catch you before you left anyway." There was a rustle of fabric â€" the doctor was dressing. "Where are you going?"

"To a nearby military base â€" we need a better HQ than this cavern."

"And you will leave tonight?"

"We hope to be in position before tomorrow night," he answered. "We cannot just take a small base â€" it would not hold everyone, and would not be easily defensible. We might need the medical facilities at a larger HQ."

"Of course," she murmured. "You can turn around now, and take off your helmet." John obeyed quietly, tucking his helmet under one arm. "I suppose you want to take Cortana."

"I would like to establish her â€" you," he amended as the AI's purple-blue form bloomed to life on Dr. Halsey's holographic pedestal, "as quickly as possible in a military base."

"I would appreciate that. I feel fat," Cortana admitted. Her holographic avatar had, indeed, changed â€" and it was actually kind of chubby looking. This was a consequence of the lesser capabilities of the laptop that was currently her "home," but it made John smirk a little to see the form she considered her "physical" body change to suit how she was processing.

"I will need you in fighting trim," he warned her.

"Oh, I'm perfectly fit," she assured him, gesturing to his armor. "As soon as I'm back inside your armor, I'll be fine â€" and if you can get me into something stronger, I'll be running laps around whoever knocked out all the other AIs."

"If the base's systems haven't been compromised. I cannot risk you now, Cortana. You are our last AI, at least that we know of."

"Hm, yes. I feel rather special." Cortana smirked, looking at Dr. Halsey. "You'll be careful, right?" There was real concern in her tone, and John silently thanked the AI for voicing his own worries about the doctor. "We can't risk losing you, either."

"I'll be fine," the older woman assured the two younger beings. "I'm not dead yet."

"No, but if this cavern evacuates, you may be left behind in the confusion," John pointed out.

"Captain Septima wouldn't let that happen." John knew the captain well enough now to know that â€" but things happened in the middle of crises that she couldn't control. Dr. Halsey smiled, seeing the anxiety and frustration in the Chief's eyes â€" the range of emotions that he conveyed through his facial expressions had certainly grown since she had last spent much time with him. "Really, John, I will be fine. You should be going, and take Cortana with you, or she will forever be asking me if I need more medication."

Cortana sputtered a protest but disappeared, signaling that John could take her chip out â€" which he did, and slotted it into the back of his helmet. "Be careful," John said softly, resealing his helmet.

"You, too," Dr. Halsey answered. "And say goodbye to Rebecca." John stopped mid-turn, glancing back both in question and surprise. The older woman flapped a hand at him. "She's a civilian, John, and not used to the rapid deployment that you think normal. She'll worry about you, otherwise. And it's polite."

"She'll worry anyway," Cortana quipped. John thought the AI had the right of it, but merely nodded to the doctor and slipped out of the tent. The Spartans were sparring lightly, more out of boredom than any increased energy â€" they would need it tonight and tomorrow for the run to the nearest military camp, at least some of which would be above ground and vulnerably slow. Without pausing, John turned further into the camp and headed for the portion given over to the Yuray refugees. He felt Kelly watch him go, but she didn't make to follow.

He found all of the refugees resting around small campfires, talking quietly or doing some last-minute chores. Most of the children and older folk were already asleep, or at least in dark tents. John stepped off of the central "road" through the camp and into their assigned area; some of the nearest adults turned and leaned back or half-rose in surprise.

Recalling himself, John removed his helmet. The sight of his now-familiar face was relaxing to those who had known him during that year of civilian living, and several adults greeted him softly.

Luke was sitting around a fire near the road and, spotting him, patted the spot on the ground next to him in open invitation. Apologetically â€" and, John noted with surprise, with true regret â€" the Spartan shook his head, saying quietly, "I'm taking my team out in a few minutes, and was advised to say goodbye."

Luke, grinning in a rather self-satisfied way, pointed him in the right direction. Rebecca's small tent was a dark brown-green mottled pattern. Aware of just how little privacy the camp afforded, and just how many ears were listening in, John called softly at the doorway. The door unzipped after a moment of shuffling from inside, and Rebecca ducked through, nearly running into John as she came out, already dressed in her night wear.

"Oh, John!" She smiled to see him, though, and John returned it. "Good evening."

John dipped his head and said quietly, "I'm about to leave and docâ€" Quickly, John rethought his phrasing and said instead, "I

wanted to ensure you were comfortable."

Rebecca chuckled and nodded. "As comfy as can be," she said. "You're leaving tonight?" There was some concern in her voice. "You just brought us back, and I know you were in the command tent all day, and your team was working out â€" or something. You'll get some rest, right?"

Smiling softly â€" it felt good to have someone worry about him not as a soldier but as a human being, without being overbearing about it, and without the awkwardness that came from Dr. Halsey's newly mothering attitude â€" John nodded. "We plan to cover a few kilometers tonight, and then we'll rest," he promised. "We don't go into battle fatigued if we can help it."

"Hmph." The woman wasn't exactly convinced, but she trusted him to know what he was doing, at least in these situations. "Be careful," she merely said, touching his forearm armor lightly. "Thank you for coming to see me."

John merely nodded, glad that Dr. Halsey had suggested it now. Civilians weren't used to the way soldiers â€" especially Spartans â€" acted, moving between bases at the drop of a hat to respond to fresh threats that evolved even on the march. However, after a few more reassurances that he would be careful â€" and sleep, and eat, and keep Kelly from running wild â€" Rebecca let him go with a quiet, "Good night, John. See you soon."

On his way back to the Spartan camp, having stopped to say farewell to a few other friends in the camp, John slowly slid his helmet back on, calling up his motion tracker. It hadn't been of any use against the Glowsticks, but the thirteen green signals â€" plus Dr. Halsey's and other random friendly's signatures â€" standing in a cluster at the opening of the exit tunnel to the east were comforting.

No one commented on his late arrival, though John was prepared to bear some remarks from Kelly, and they silently left with no more fanfare than a few of the nearest adults turning to watch the silent movement.

John took point, leaving his energy sword in his pocket â€" it would be more hindrance than help in the close quarters of the tunnels â€" and wielding instead one of their precious rifles. The three Elites brought up the rear. The cramped tunnels slowed their pace, especially since the Elites were forced to shuffle along awkwardly, their heads and torsos bent at an extreme angle for such movement.

A few hours of steady jogging, however, brought them out of the tunnels and into the cold night air. They set up camp and opened the MREs, which Captain Septima had left out of the civilian supply for them, for a quick dinner while Kelly, Fred, and Lazlakovic stayed on watch and then took a few moments to eat as the rest repacked the gear. Then they set off again, using the darkness to move swiftly through the dense pine forests, keeping far from any signs of civilization. This mission was about securing a base, and though John wanted to check every house for more refugees, such actions would have taken too long, and the cavern couldn't support many more anyway.

They skirted widely around any town larger than a handful of

buildings, moving through passes in the mountains that Cortana marked on their HUDs. At one point, faced with either climbing over a mountain or using a road, John opted for speed and they sprinted down a five-mile stretch of highway. Nothing glowing came of the risk, but no one let their guard down. Occasionally, they heard the whine of some aircraft overhead â€" it had to be Forerunner, because everything human had been grounded or destroyed â€" and dashed for cover.

Once, in the distance, Kelly had spotted a group of five Glowsticks. The team had headed for them, but by the time they arrived, the creatures had disappeared. The tracks led towards a town, and John reluctantly refused to engage. Five of them wouldn't overpower the group, but they probably could manage to call for reinforcements before an ambush could be carried out, especially if the Spartans had to be careful of civilians caught in the cross-fire.

Kelly, running about a hundred meters to the left of the main group, called in just as dawn started pinking the eastern ridges of the mountains. "I've found a secluded cave," she said over the private comm to John. "Clean, dry, and easily defensible."

The Chief called in the Spartans to Kelly's position, where his sister was already on guard above the cave's entrance. N'hamee and Tom joined her on guard, leaving the rest to catch a few hours of sleep. Waiting until noon was sufficient for all of them to rest, with the guards changing every hour to allow everyone five hours of sleep.

The group was more cautious now, as they left the largest mountains and pine forests for thin scrub and hills. The military base was, like so many out there, on a flat plain from which they could see for miles â€" which meant John's team was visible for miles as they went for the base. They moved quickly and silently, until John could make out the fence surrounding the base. He held up a closed fist and they all halted.

On their bellies now, they stalked the base, surrounding it â€" three Elites and three rainbow-armored Spartan IVs in hasty camouflage spread out to the north and east while the IIs came in from the south, the IIIs with two IVs from the west.

## 16. Ultimatums

### \*\*Chapter 15 â€" Ultimatums\*\*

John lay in a shallow depression, watching the base. There was no obvious movement; his motion tracker was dark. A gentle turn of his head confirmed that the sky was still clear, as it had been the entire way. He disliked it, but if the Glowsticks had cleared out the base, they may have left it unguarded, like they left Yuray without troops.

One by one, the Spartans' green lights winked on, indicating that they saw no movement. They all moved forward a bit, and now they could make out the names painted on the ships, tanks, and cars still sitting where they had died. The wreckage of one plane nearby said that a quick-acting pilot had been able to take off before the EMP wave had been fully realized.

The base was a low, squat building, only one story, but wide, shaped in a simple rectangle with a sloped roof to shrug off winter's snow. There were five outer entrances that the team noted, though no one doubted there were escape routes dug under their feet with hidden entrances they had passed already. The building was a grey-green that managed to make it seem to belong in the landscape despite the lack of color variety.

They spent nearly two hours sneaking forwards, but still nothing moved in the base. The wind picked up, making the grass and shrubs bend in the breeze. Finally, they were fifty yards from the fence; it was now or never.

"Move in," John ordered quietly. He was on his feet and moving before the words left his mouth, and to his left, Kelly moved up, already outpacing him. He hit the fence and burst through it like a bullet through a rotten melon, following Kelly into the main building.

Fred was through and moving towards a smaller outbuilding as John ducked through the doorway, slowing his steps to clear the hallways. They were silent, deserted, and dark; Cortana remained silent to allow him to concentrate on listening for movement that might indicate refugees " or Glowsticks.

"Clear," Fred reported from his building. "Moving into main base."

John winked his acknowledgement light and moved further into the darkness, turning his headlights on. They pierced the gloom " he spotted still-full coffee mugs sitting around, papers lying where they had been left on the floor and tables as their previous owners had been taken. The computers were all silent, the holographic units unresponsive when he tried activating one.

The rest of the team slowly congregated in the main building, clearing the outbuildings first and then moving inwards. They found the armory, full of useless keys to the large machines out side but, more importantly, also crammed with guns, ammunition, and even enough body armor to outfit most of the refugee group. Kelly, Lazlakovic, and Basky found the commander's office and pried open the safe located in the wall to get at the codes for the base's underground bunker.

John led the way to this bunker, the codes written on a slip of paper in one hand and a pistol in the other. The pistol's heavier, thicker bullet would have more impact force, perhaps rendering it more useful against the Glowsticks " he hoped.

Inputting the code quickly, John stepped back as the doors to the underground bunker silently slid open, a dark tunnel sloping gently away. The lights sputtered as they tried to turn on and found that their source of electricity had failed.

Half the team moved in, leaving the three Elites, Naomi, Tom, and Lucy to guard their backs as they descended into the Earth.

After nearly fifteen minutes of walking, they met the next set of doors and John input the next code, taking his glove off to press his hand against the scanner. It beeped in quiet recognition " every

base was keyed to accept a Spartan in the event of an emergency â€" in the doors retreated once more.

The Spartans' headlights couldn't pierce far into the gloom that surrounded them, but it was a standard bunker, built to hold up to three thousand people in an emergency and supplied to keep them alive for up to a year. The stores of food below them were extensive, to say the least â€" and there were real showers, toilets, and faucets, though John supposed the hot water would require generators to produce, since the main power grid seemed offline.

The bunks lining the walls and extending in rows five beds deep and thirty long took up most of the first room. In the second, along the walls, were large machines that could rehydrate all of the dehydrated food stored below, as well as a ship-sized kitchen in case someone had laid in real food in preparation. The left side of the room was completely filled with long communal benches and tables and a dish-washing area.

They came next to what could have rivaled a ship's gym, though this one didn't have different gravity zones. The sets of weights wouldn't be enough for the Spartans, but they would do very well for training up the adults in the refugee group to survive in case of another invasion. The running track around the room's perimeter was a welcome sight to Kelly, who ran the quarter-mile in moments and reveled in the freedom of movement.

Beyond that was a room with all the essentials â€" the boilers, incinerators, and other necessary equipment to keep the place warm, provide hot water, and generate electricity. Checking the fuel stores, Fred reported that they had probably a year's worth, if everyone did their best to conserve the hot water and turned lights out when not in use, especially with their diminished population compared to what the panic rooms could support. They would also be able to scavenge more, if necessary, from the tanks used for vehicles and planes above them, and from surrounding cities, if the Glowsticks hadn't already taken it.

"Over there," Cortana ordered, her avatar appearing in John's HUD to point towards a terminal next to the small medical bay.

"Is it safe to plug you in?" John asked, marching over to the computer.

"If Dr. Halsey and I are correct in thinking it was a one-time pulse, yes. However, if it is a consistent signal â€" and since your armor is still working, it likely isn't â€" I could be fried." There was a dark tone behind the AI's voice. "But I need to try."

Hesitantly, John touched the terminal. It remained dark. "There's no power to it," he said, though the AI could clearly see it through his external cameras.

Cortana sighed. "You'll need to get the generators running, John."

Without commenting, John turned to Fred. "Get a generator going," he ordered. The II nodded and headed for the back room again.

"It's not like you to be so distracted," Cortana scolded. "What's up,



John?"

The Chief shook his head automatically, which made everyone in eyeshot glance over, but he had turned his loudspeakers off and so spoke to Cortana in the privacy of his helmet. "This doesn't feel right. The Glowsticks took over Earth and herded humanity aboard those ships, as far as we know, but we haven't seen much of them â€" Kelly and I ran into three, but we've been on the move for almost a full day and haven't been attacked yet. The kind of numbers Captain Septima described should make it easy to send a force against us, but we only saw two groups, and one was in the air. It's too easy."

"Maybe our enemy is just studying humanity," Cortana suggested. "When you want to study something, you don't take the wounded or damaged specimens, which might explain why the Glowsticks kill anyone injured or ill before taking the healthy onesâ€" wherever they go."

"But taking almost \_all\_ of humanity?" John protested.

"Breeding programs? I don't know, John, I'm in the dark here as much as you are." There was a slight belligerence to Cortana's tone now. "Genetic variety in humanity is extensive. Perhaps they wanted to catch all of you."

"And the AIs we still can't contact?"

"Without powerâ€" They're sitting in their little crystals dying slowly as they process themselves to death," the AI replied, sadly. "And if I get shut down, that's what'll happen to me."

It suddenly became important for John to keep Cortana in his suit. They needed an AI â€" most systems humanity used now required at least a dumb AI to access, and the big MAC guns required more than that. If they were still in orbit, John planned to use them against these invisible ships.

"Chief." The urgency in Tom's voice as it crackled over the radio made John turn for the exit without waiting for further communication. Noting his rapid change of pace, the rest of the team with him followed, Fred abandoning his task of filling the giant generators with fuel. "We've been seen â€" I make two transports, coming in from the east and north."

"There's another pair coming in from the west," Naomi reported.

"Retreat into the base. Block all exits and hold them," John ordered, unlimbering his rifle and checking its magazine.

There were five ways into the base, so they split into teams. John and Naomi covered the western entrance while the three Elites ranged themselves in the garage with an unfortunately weak door, large enough to admit a helicopter. Kelly and Fred each teamed up with a IV and guarded doors facing to the east, and the rest defended both doors and a garage facing to the west.

"Touchdown," Kelly reported. They all heard the thumps as large aircraft came to rest outside; a little dust fell off the hanging lamps over her head.

"Keep it tight," John ordered. "No heroics, just defense. We want them to get the impression this place is impregnable."

"Yes, sir," the rest of the team chorused.

The door in front of N'hamee rattled as something hit it; he set his hooves, forcing his thick finger into the awkwardly thin trigger ring of a human rifle. Though the Shadow of Veracity had originally been stocked with a few cases of plasma rifles and pistols, they had been taken by the displaced crew back to the flagship, because the Arbiter had hoped the lack of Covenant weaponry would induce the missing Spartans to further believe the intention of harmony from his people.

Across the base, at the same time, a glowing energy sword cut right through the door in front of Tom and Lucy. The two IIIs waited calmly for the Glowstick to slice its way into the base, aiming for a point just to the left of the arm where its chest and sunken head should be. All of them had studied the structure of the armor Kelly and John had brought back. It was eerily silent except for the whine of the sword and groaning complaints from the door as it melted into slag.

Basky crouched, feeling Lazlakovic standing right over him, her rifle reporting loudly just over his head. His ears would be ringing without the protective cover of his helmet. The Glowstick's helmet blossomed open like some sort of weird glowing flower, and a blue-glow human skull inside opened its mouth and screched as it attacked.

With a wince for the volume and pitch of the noise, the Spartan IV held down the trigger and the rifle roared a retort to the creature's screaming, catching it full in the holographic face. It crumpled, glowing energy sword swinging with its death throes and, luckily, managing to catch a neighboring Glowstick's knee, taking its armor off clean and pitching it sideways.

L'eto felt his mandibles open wide with the force of his roar as he faced the Forerunner machine, its glowing energy sword blazing orange nearer the Sangheili's eyes as he dropped the rifle to catch the Glowstick's wrist and keep it from cutting at him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw N'kane firing into his own attacker's side, the bullets ringing off the armor. A few managed to penetrate, but still it advanced, and N'kane abandoned the human weaponry in favor of the hand-to-hand techniques they had learned both as children and more recently from the Spartans.

L'eto turned his strength on the thing's wrist, slowly managing to turn its blade around and force it into the foe's own helmet. It died with a sputter of energy, the orange glow fading slowly like the heart of a worthy comrade. Ripping the wrist from the machine, L'eto activated the energy sword quickly, turning to meet his next opponent as they came through the hole blasted through the garage door.

Fred was kneeling as the first Glowstick came in, opening the door with the unlocked doorknob. Its guard was down " this was a small maintenance hatch, clearly not a main entrance " and it expected no resistance, so Fred hoped it was processing surprise as he sprang up from behind a desk and buried his knife deep into the thing's helmet.

It died with a quiet zap of energy that forced the II to release his prey, but the energy died quickly and he was able to retrieve the Glowstick's energy sword and toss it to Landsmen, who would need it more if they were targeted again. However, the scout " or backup " had been alone, it seemed, and the two soldiers were forced to listen to the report of gunfire and screeches " clearly Glowstick, since Spartans and Elites didn't yell like that " as they waited for their next attacker.

Kelly wielded the energy sword to good effect, forcing one of the Glowsticks back, its own energy sword already cut off " though, unfortunately, clearly unusable because the II had sliced it too far towards the end, right through the power pack. Slightly to one side and behind, Carter's rifle spat fire and death at the other two Glowsticks.

They, hampered by their comrade, were trying to shoot around him, but Kelly kept him stumbling into either one. With an angry screech, the thing finally dashed forward, deliberately impaling itself on the sword and dying " Kelly was trapped for a mere moment, the Glowstick's armor dragging her forwards as it slumped on her sword before the weapon could cut through.

One of the other Forerunner machines took advantage of the stumble with Spartan-like speed and dashed forward, energy sword at the ready. It took Carter through the shoulder, nearly severing his right arm, and he jerked back with an involuntary cry of pain. The reaction saved him, however, as it only let the bare tip poke through his back armor.

Kelly, hearing her teammate cry out, tugged her sword free and swept it to her right, taking the Glowstick in the shoulder. The energy sword started melting towards it head, but not quickly enough " Kelly kicked, sending the other Glowstick coming at her left back as she caught it in the kneecap. She readjusted her grip on the awkward handle for her sword and, this time, managed to stab the Glowstick pinning Carter through the helmet, killing it instantly. The sword died, and Carter slumped, groaning.

The Spartan II couldn't check him now, though " the third Glowstick was coming at her already, and she was over-extended in her haste to take out the second attacker before it killed her partner. Her forearm armor had the Jackal-like shield in it, which wouldn't last for more than one blow, but it would have to suffice " she powered it on and blocked the Forerunner machine's down-swinging blade. The shield held for a second and then popped away, but Kelly already had her balance back and struck before the thing could recover, punching her sword through its chest. Its arms waved weakly for a moment, burning her armor near her right thigh, but it died before it could complete the cut.

Taking a breath, Kelly scanned the doorway for more enemies, but there didn't seem to be any. Outside, dusk was falling " the dim light coming through the doorway was hardly satisfactory so she had her headlights on, and they found Carter slumped against the wall, holding a hand to his shoulder.

"Thanks for the rescue," he joked weakly as Kelly knelt beside him. They had no biofoam with them, but the medical facilities in the bunker would be more than enough to repair the damage, if they could

get him there quickly.

Gently, Kelly examined the wound even as Carter himself unslung his rifle with his good arm and took its holding strap off to make a sling. "Hardly stings, Kelly," he panted, though the tightness in his voice gave lie to his words.

"You'll make it," she told him, helping him secure the sling and then winding a pair of fatigues from their supply packs around his shoulder and binding it tightly to keep the wound from opening. Thankfully, the energy sword had seared all of the open arteries that were likely severed, but extended periods of movement " of fighting " would reopen them and Carter would die of blood loss quickly.

"Carter's injured," Kelly reported through the radio.

"I'm coming to back you up," Landsmen said immediately. "We've only had one here, and Fred can recall if he needs me."

"Send Carter downstairs," John ordered, his voice neutral " which meant he was likely in a lull of battle. "I'm sending Naomi to back up the Sangheili." There was a burst of gunfire on the other end, then the radio cut out as the Chief turned back to his own duty.

Carter insisted on waiting until Landsmen came down the hall and crouched next to Kelly before he would leave, though his face was pale with pain as he slowly managed to stand. He went deeper in the base and Kelly spared a moment to hope the IV could make it back on his own and begin treating himself without passing out on the way.

"L'eto requires immediate medical attention." N'hamee's voice was strained as it came through the radio a few minutes after Carter reported being safely in the medical bay. In the interim, there had been a general lull in Glowstick attacks as they seemed to reconsider their tactics.

John glanced at his map of the station. Fred hadn't had anyone at his door since the first Glowstick, but they were getting thicker. He couldn't spare anyone from the garage, and from the sounds of gunfire, Kelly and Landsmen were hard-pressed themselves. Tom and Lucy had been silent so far, but just as the Chief thought of sending one of them to the garage, Tom's light winked red " a signal that they were unable to assist.

"I'll get him down to medical," Lazlakovic said. "Basky can handle himself for a bit. We're not facing many ourselves." There was a touch of disappointment in her voice.

John winked his green light to approve the move, though he disliked leaving a IV with only a rifle on guard alone. However, he had his own problems " another two Glowsticks were hovering around the outside of the door, their orange glow touching the darkness John was hiding in, his headlights deactivated for the moment.

The machines clearly weren't bright " had John been invading the base, he would have used one of the tanks sitting out in the open to blow holes into the walls so numerous they couldn't all be guarded

â€" but they were relentless, strong, and unfortunately prone to self-sacrifice. Already, John's armor was blackened on the right hip where a Glowstick had managed to burn him with an energy sword as the Spartan's attention had been on another foe whose own sword was far too close to the Chief's head for his comfort.

"I hate Glowsticks," he growled as the pair advanced.

"They return the sentiment," Cortana quipped.

The battle continued into the night, with the Spartans and Sangheili all taking small wounds as the kamikaze tactics of the Glowsticks began telling on the defenders. Fred barely escaped alive when suddenly swarmed by five Glowsticks at once, giving up the door almost immediately in favor of retreating deeper into the base.

With that hole punched through their defenses, John ordered everyone back a layer, to an inner division in the building built for just such occasions. The only way in was through one thick door that separated the outer rooms â€" mostly for day-to-day operations and staff â€" from the inner ones, where the classified and important work was done, and where the entrance to the bunker was.

Kelly was the next to fall, an energy sword embedded in her hip where the dying Glowstick had left it. The bubbling of the hydrostatic gel as it oozed from the armor when the sword died with its owner was loud in the sudden silence; the Glowstick had been the last of a pack, but the defenders seemed to be getting a moment to recharge and prepare.

"Take her to the medical bay," John ordered Fred.

"I can still fight," Kelly protested, already slapping a make-shift bandage made from crumpled papers and someone's shirt tied tightly over the wound. Fred, without waiting for John's reply, picked his sister up bridal-style, keeping her wounded leg on the outside so he didn't jostle it and break open the seared blood vessels, and took her away, though she muttered at him for it.

The remaining defenders tightened their grip on their weapons as clicking â€" the sound of Glowstick feet moving rapidly on metal floors â€" reached them. It was slower than usual, however, and the thing that came around the door was unlike any Forerunner armor they had yet seen.

This one was four meters tall, towering over the Glowsticks and Spartans both. Where the Glowsticks had four arms, this one had two â€" and the giant metal shoulder armor was missing, replaced instead by slimmer, elegant silver armor traced in some sort of golden gilding. It hovered over the creature without visible means of support. Underneath, John could only see a black material â€" either a leathery skin or a bodysuit. From its shoulders, reminiscent of Earth's ancient generals, hung a leather-like cape, and the unnatural whiteness of it confused their brains for a brief second.

It wore a thin helmet that did little more than add several inches to its height with a proud plume of multicolored feathers, as dazzling in their rainbow as the white cloak was in its lack of color. The helmet's faceplate was a curved to resemble, John guessed, the face within, and glowed white along the lines at its temples, eyes, and

jaw.

Its hands had six long, fine fingers, tipped in claws either made from armor or encased in it and clearly built for playing with holographic screens, not pulling triggers or doing manual labor. It balanced on two hind legs, with the knees bending like a human's and the feet thick, two-pronged armored affairs that were tipped with blunt claws " either the armor over actual talons or simply added for effect.

Its armor glowed a gentle white color, almost peacefully " in confusion, all of the Spartans and Sangheili hesitated, which allowed the creature a single moment to hold up a white flag with palms out-facing and clearly empty.

Wary, John kept his energy sword sizzling in his hand, but signaled for everyone to hold their fire. The sword was running out of power, and soon he would have to switch for one of the now-numerous Glowstick swords they had from their previous kills.

"Greetings, Demon " or do you prefer John?" The creature's voice was completely sexless, neutral in tone, but John blinked as this creature identified him " in his armor, no less " without him ever having encountered its kind before, at least that he knew of. "I come to discuss terms of surrender."

John turned on his loudspeakers. "We do not surrender," he answered. That was clear. Not only was the Chief not of high enough rank to surrender humanity to this creature's army, but he wasn't about to go against every fiber of his being and training.

The creature's head tilted. "Then you will perish. Despite your achievements on the field of battle today, you and your team have felt but a fraction of the power that could be brought against you, should you prove obdurate. This was merely a test of your strength, leadership, and capabilities " both as an individual and a group. Sadly overestimated, on both accounts. Surrender yourselves and you will be spared death."

John didn't even need to contemplate it, but shook his head. "We will not surrender," he repeated.

The white glow to the creature's armor intensified slightly. "Obdurate. Such were the reports." It seemed to consider something, then to speak silently to another being " it shook its head in vehement disagreement before nodding reluctantly. John got the sense it was focusing back on the group after a moment more of silent discussion. "Very well. You may keep this base. We shall allow you to move your band of escapees from your underground hole to the bunker below this building, without molestation."

All of the group tensed " the enemy knew their location? And about the bunker, which was supposed to be impervious to all scans and radars? Suddenly, the battle seemed very one-sided.

Oblivious " or perhaps enjoying their shock " the creature continued. "Furthermore, we will release all humans currently aboard our ships " unharmed and in full possession of their mentalities " and the fleet currently trapped in what you call a Slipspace bubble, to be returned to Earth without harm. In return, we require a

simple surrender."

John refused to rise to the bait, however, and waited silently. Apparently unprovoked, the creature said calmly after a moment, "Your immediate surrender to us, Demon â€" yours and your team's, that is. We shall release our hostages as soon as your team is aboard our ship. You may confirm humanity's restoration, if you choose, before joining them."

"What do you want?" John asked, trying to understand why such powerful foes wanted the Spartans and three Sangheili â€" and were willing to trade 99% of humanity and the Admiral's fleet for them. "What are you?"

"To understand," the creature replied laconically, "you would need a thousand years of history that we cannot divulge now, for lack of time. We are ancient ancillas, much like your Cortana." John realized with a jolt that he should be hearing Cortana's voice in his ear, but she was silent â€" uncharacteristically so.

"Where is Cortana?" he demanded.

"Your companion has been safely stored where she may process through several libraries of catalogued information." John growled softly; Cortana was an AI, and her own "person," but it felt like part of him was missing â€" stolen, even. "She will be returned to you unharmed upon your surrender, though of course, she will be required to surrender as well."

"We don't surrender," John repeated. "And we won't, so you might as well send in your Glowsticks."

This seemed to amuse the creature, as its voice held a tint of laughter to it. "Howâ€| creative. Our studies show that humanity is certainly an inventive creature, but to name soldiers as powerful and deadly and alien to you as the Prometheans after such insignificant toys of your history isâ€| amusing. And a droll fantasy you cling to, that you may name such creatures and therefore understand them. But that has always been your way, has it not?"

John was about to answer, though he didn't know how, when the creature shrugged its shoulders delicately. "However, you have made a point of your career to keep your promises, Demon, so we believe you when you say you will not surrender. Therefore, we shall give you no choice â€" and once you are overwhelmed, we shall merely find another worthy adversary." It chilled John to the bone to think these creatures somehow knew the point he made of keeping his promises â€" could they have stripped the knowledge from Cortana? Or been spying on humanity for years, in ways more intimate than the Chief cared to think about?

With this final promise of its own, the creature turned and walked from the room, but a slight movement on the floor caught John's attention. The creature's feet didn't quite touch the floor, instead "walking" on some sort of almost-invisible platform. It was hard to focus on, the holographic panel, but it cleared at least some questions in John's mind. He had been speaking to a hologram, but it had been solid enough to hold up the white flag, which had fluttered to the ground where the creature â€" hologram â€" had dropped it, and was entirely opaque.

\_Hard light?\_ John wondered to himself, already turning to his next problem and leaving it for Cortana to worry over " if he got her back.

"Close ranks," he ordered. Those with swords crouched, ready to spring, in front " John switched to his pistol and stood behind the first line of defenders, hoping to pick off Glowsticks with the powerful gun.

The creature's departure almost seemed to signal Fred's return, who was surprised to see them having fought nothing new but took the report of the hologram's offer with a frown, and Cortana's apparent capture with a grunt of anger and surprise. "Carter's working on Kelly," he reported. "L'eto's still touch-and-go, and the medical bay hasn't been updated with Sangheili anatomy, so Carter'sâ€| doing what he can."

John nodded. Fred passed around cold water bottles, taken from the base, and everyone took a moment to unseal their helmets and take grateful gulps of the liquid. N'kane and N'hamee had a little difficulty without a lower jaw and ended spilling as much as they drank, though no one much minded, as they were all covered in sweat and blood.

They had a few moments' reprieve before the onslaught began again, this time with renewed vigor. The Glowsticks clearly had no sense of self-preservation, and were wearing down the Spartans with time and bodies as they flung themselves onto the energy swords with a fervor John could have compared to a Hunter with the death of its brother. It often served merely to inconvenience the Spartan or Sangheili at the other end of the blade and make them vulnerable to further attacks, but it was telling on them and their armor.

Basky dropped with a quickly-silenced cry when, trapped by the same trick the Glowsticks had been trying to use all night, one of their enemies managed to slice cleanly into the IV's chest armor. Naomi caught her fellow Spartan as he fell back, while Fred jumped in to divert the Glowstick's attention and managed to decapitate it with his own sword. John, Fred, Tom, Lucy, N'kane, N'hamee, Lazlakovic, and Landsmen desperately held the line to give Naomi a clear space to check the severity of the wound.

Naomi rejoined them a moment later, indicating that Basky was either going to survive or was already dead. John couldn't take the time to check, but judging by the fury behind the IV's blows as she plowed into the offensive line of Glowsticks, it was the latter.

There were no lulls this time, as the Glowsticks kept on charging their position despite the heavy death toll. The dead became a nuisance, tripping up both sides' soldiers and providing the defenders with a secondary blockage the offensive group had to climb over.

Landsmen suddenly disappeared from John's left, and he couldn't turn to look " but Fred noted the gap between them now and shifted over slightly, resealing the line.

"We've got to retreat," Fred said into the radio, speaking only to John. There was an undercurrent of anger in his tone, but the



dominant emotion John picked up from the communication was one of desperation. "We can't hold like this for long."

As if that was a signal, however, the Glowsticks suddenly melted away. Exhausted, trembling with fatigue, and still immersed in the primal brain of warfare, John leaned forward, setting his hands on his knees and merely breathing for a moment. His senses were sharp, however, heightened by adrenaline â€" which he was almost out of â€" and pain coming from a few areas on his body where repeated attacks had burned partially through his armor and permanently through his shields, though they still sputtered over a few portions of his armor.

The sounds of the Glowstick's feet on the metal floors faded, clearly moving away, and suddenly the tall white Glowstick-like creature was back. This time, however, it wasn't white â€" its armor was black and blue, with orange highlighting like the Glowsticks', and there was no sense of peace about it now.

With a frustrated tone, Fred snapped, "What do you want?" before John could decide whether to risk attacking the holographic panel still under the thing's feet or have another conversation to give his team long enough to recover their breath and strength.

"What I would like to occur here is impossible," the Forerunner ancilla responded. "However, it is remarkable that you have all â€" well, most â€" survived this long." John glanced behind him to confirm â€" sure enough, Naomi was already there, closing Basky's eyes as they stared in death and gently laying him on his back, folding his hands over the ruins of his chest, taking the time now in case they had none later. Beyond the pair, Lazlakovic was talking quietly to â€" or at, John's couldn't tell â€" Landsmen, who was quiet and still, his eyes closed. Both pairs of IVs were ignoring the rest of the room.

"A regretful death," the ancilla mused. "And yet, it could have been avoided." The thing's helmet turned towards John. "Out of our interest, we will extend the same terms of surrender, Demon. Humanity's future, guaranteedâ€" In return for eleven â€" pardon, nine â€" Spartans, three Sangheili, and Cortana. It is not such a high price."

"It's still impossible," John answered, fatigue making him foggy-headed. He had been fighting hard for hours, as had everyone else â€" Fred was taking the chance the momentary cease-fire gave them and collecting as many energy swords from the dead Glowsticks as he could, and then he began stacking the dead armor in a bulwark against further intrusion, completely ignoring for now the black-armored Forerunner ancilla still in their midst in favor of building their defenses.

"Perhaps an understanding would provide you the necessary stimulus to respond more favorably," the ancilla said after a silent moment. Suddenly, John felt the cool sensation in his head that said Cortana had returned â€" but she was silent for a moment, which allowed the creature to say, "We shall give you twenty-four of your hours â€" that is one of your days â€" to discuss our conditions with your ancilla, Demon, and then we will have our answer. I believe you bury your dead, so you may leave the base to do so, but traveling beyond the borders of the fence will result in termination."

The ancilla's hologram platform rolled away on a cushion of air silently, the creature appearing to "walk" out of the room.

Fred kicked at the pile of Forerunner armor he was currently carrying in mute fury, but John took the creature at its word and deactivated his energy sword, putting it in his thigh pocket. He knelt next to Naomi, who was staring at Basky's body with her helmet resting on her knee.

"Hey, Chief," she said dully, exhausted in mind and body. "We gonna sleep now?"

"In a bit, Spartan," John answered, drawing her to her feet and gently pushing her towards the hallway that led to the base's bunker. "Go report to medical. You, too, Lazlakovic." His second-in-command tried to argue, but Fred mutely pushed her in the same direction as John had Naomi, and she went quietly, pausing only to take up as many energy swords as she could carry back with her.

John and Fred each carried one of the Spartan IVs. Basky seemed lighter in John's arms than he should have, but heavier at the same time â€" likely a consequence of the physical fatigue in his arms and the mental anguish of having a soldier as close as Basky had become die under his command.

The two II brothers stepped carefully over Glowstick corpses as they made their way through the halls and finally out into the fresh air. To his surprise, John noted that he could see the hulking tanks and aircraft â€" it was nearly true dawn, and the light was increasing by the moment.

It was dark enough, however, to see the glowing line of Forerunner armor standing vigil along the fence, in rows three deep and too numerous to count.

Fred brought two shovels from an outbuilding and the pair dug the graves silently, by hand. Though normally John would have ordered that the bodies be laid aside, to be returned to their families, or at least their burying postponed until everyone was rested, he felt as though he had no choice. They would likely not survive the next wave of Prometheans.

Still Cortana had said nothing, which worried him in some distant corner of his mind, but mostly John focused on his current task, which involved bending, scooping, lifting, and piling.

The graves were just under John's chin in height when Fred helped him climb out without bringing down the walls of dirt. They gently lowered Basky into one, laying his rifle â€" uselessly marred by an energy sword when the IV had used it as a shield â€" across his chest.

Landsmen they buried with one of the energy swords; John finally got a good look at the wound that had taken the IV. The energy sword had cut clean through the femoral artery, nearly severing the IV's leg. Despite the cauterizing heat, the blood had been pumping hard and fast enough that Landsmen had likely bled out within moments.

The dirt went back in the hole much more easily than it had come out,

and John circled the perimeter in rocks to mark it at least in some way.

Silently, Fred and John stood for a moment at the foot of each grave, thanking them for their service " and thinking of the friendship they had shared. Then they returned the shovels to the outbuilding and went back inside. Dawn had truly come, and if they had stopped to watch, they would have beheld one of the glorious mountain sunrises, but they didn't. There was no room for beauty in the new world.

## 17. Explanations

### \*\*Chapter 16 " Explanations\*\*

John and Fred returned to the bunker, closing and locking all the doors behind them, though it likely would do no good against the Glowsticks if they were determined. Still, it made them feel at least a little safer, and it would slow the Forerunner soldiers down if nothing else.

The pair came into the medical bay immediately, passing by the kitchen though both were hungry. L'eto was lying on two of the tables, placed end-to-end to support his full body. N'kane was standing over him, pulling a sheet up over the Sangheili's face. Silently, John touched the engineer's shoulder.

"His hearts have failed," N'kane said quietly. "The electrocution was too damaging " our organs are similar to yours, and he was going into something similar to kidney failure, but his hearts gave out first." The tiny entry and exit wounds the Sangheili showed John seemed too insignificant to have caused such massive damage, and the Elite's body was swollen-looking, a consequence of the electricity that had coursed through his body.

"What happened?" John asked quietly, helping N'kane roll the two tables with their heavy burden to the side, out of the way.

"I believe there are several classes of Glowsticks " or Prometheans," the Sangheili answered. "We have mostly been encountering those with energy swords, but there have been a few armed with weapons that throw small metal spikes and electrocute an opponent." John nodded " he had dodged a few of those taser-like weapons himself. "L'eto was battling one with an energy sword and another Promethean came upon them from behind and electrocuted him. It is a cowardly army we face, but they are fierce and loyal warriors."

John mutely nodded, crossing the room to let the two remaining Sangheili mourn their brother and decide how best to honor his body. Kelly was lying on another table, the floor below her spattered liberally with blood from her thigh wound, which Carter had managed to stitch shut.

"How are you feeling?" John asked his sister, removing his helmet.

"Better than I look," she answered, moving as though to sit up; John pushed her down firmly. "John, I'm fine, really. Just need to replace

this armor piece and I'll be good as new."

"Stay down. We have 24 hours before they attack again." Kelly raised an eyebrow in mute question. "Theirâ€| commander, I guessâ€| came and spoke to us. They want our surrender in return for humanity." Kelly frowned, glancing questioningly at the Elites. "And the Sangheili."

"Nine Spartans and two Elites for all of humanity?" Kelly shook her head. "It's not a great deal on their side."

"And the fleet â€" they have it trapped in some sort of Slipspace bubble." Feeling ready to collapse, John pulled over a table himself and gingerly sat down on it, setting his helmet to the side. He had several wounds that could use medical attention, but he wanted to puzzle out the Forerunner's offer first. "They took Cortana, and she's back in my suit now, but I haven't heard from her yet. She's supposed to have information about the Prometheans â€" that's what the Glowsticks are called â€" that could change my mind."

Kelly's features softened, hearing the frustration and desperation in her brother's voice. She touched his knee gently. "I'm sure she'll talk to us when she's ready. Obviously we can't surrender."

"I don't know if we have a choice, at this point," Fred said darkly, pulling over a table himself and sitting on it. Carter was stitching up a nasty wound on his bicep, having removed the armor on that arm. "They're just going to keep throwing Glowsticks â€" Prometheans â€" at us until we all die. They seem not to care about their losses today, and only stopped to give us back Cortana and see if she can convince us to surrender. But why us? We're just Spartans â€" and Sangheili. We don't have any political power, or wealth, or anything except our soldiering skills, and they have plenty of soldiers."

"Forerunner artifacts are tuned to humans," John mused, beginning the process of taking off his own armor to assess his wounds. Naomi suddenly appeared, as did Lazlakovic, and both were unarmored, dressed mostly in bandages. The two IVs helped both Fred and John out of their armor. Everyone moved slowly to avoid opening wounds and due to fatigue, but eventually, all of the Spartans were unarmored and being treated or treating each other's wounds as they discussed the battle.

It was dishearteningly difficult to battle an opponent who had no sense of self-preservation. The Glowsticks had died by the dozens just for the chance of wounding a Spartan or Sangheili soldier. They sacrificed themselves in ways that made even the IIIs, trained to carry out only a single mission, nervous.

Finally, everyone was bandaged and at least slightly cleaner, though the base wasn't stocked with clothing large enough to fit the larger Spartans, so they were back in body suits. Leaving L'eto's body in the medical bay, and with Fred carrying Kelly, they went out to the cafeteria and tiredly grabbed whatever was first out of the supply crates. The Sangheili had to make do with human food, but they didn't complain.

Out of habit, John carried his helmet with him, though he didn't wear his armor, and set it on the table. They were half-way through the

silent but determined meal when his loudspeakers suddenly crackled to life, jolting everyone out of the semi-stupor they had been in.

John had never been so grateful to hear Cortana's voice when she spoke over the helmet's loudspeakers. "Goodâ€| morning," she said quietly.

"Cortana." John breathed a silent sigh of relief. "Are you okay?"

"Green, Chief," she answered. "And full of new informationâ€| And you're not going to like it."

"Give us a brief summary," the Chief ordered. He doggedly kept eating as Cortana reported, though his appetite was long gone within the first few sentences.

"We're facing a Forerunner army. The Prometheans â€" the Glowsticks, as we call them â€" were once their highest forms of soldiers, but they're more like Grunts â€" very powerful ones - now." Everyone winced â€" if they had been this torn up just facing the basic units, how bad were the commanders? "They're dumb AIs, basically, but they weren't alwaysâ€| They used to be real soldiers, flesh and blood creatures. But a long â€" long â€" time ago, a Forerunner called the Didact turned them into digital beings, using something called the Composer, during the Forerunner-Flood war." There was raw excitement, as well as cautious warning, in Cortana's voice. "The Composerâ€| turns living creatures into AIs." John raised an eyebrow, but let her continue.

"The super-Glowstick you talked to, John, was an ancilla of the Didact's, specially coded to protect him, named Lanut. I'm still processing this part of their history â€" it's very complicated and political â€" but I think the Didact was imprisoned somehow, somewhere, by another Forerunner, back when humanity and the Forerunners and the Flood were entangled in war. There are references to a Librarian in connection with humanity, the Composer, and the Didact, but I have yet to connect all the dots." John nodded; he didn't need the history lesson.

"The ancillas are forbidden from interfering directly with releasing the Didact, but they can do so indirectly. Lanut and his group â€" there are two others, Rien and Athera, and all three are far beyond anything we could conceive of in artificial intelligence â€" want to bring the Didact back. There were more, but those three have been killing them off â€" slowly, so the others wouldn't be suspicious. Why they've waited this long is uncertain â€" but they need a human, and that human needs to be very strong, fast, and intelligent to get past all the obstacles to reawaken the Didact." John frowned â€" Guilty Spark had called him a Reclaimer once and nearly tricked him into activating a Halo ring, and he wasn't especially eager to go on another Forerunner mission.

"The War Chieftain was one of their 'indirect' methods," Cortana continued, making John blink. "I'm not sure how capturing all of humanity and trapping our fleet in a Slipspace bubble is not a 'direct' interference, but they insist it isn't, and so they can do it â€" and they have, obviously. They're desperate to break the Didact free, though why now, I don't know."

"Why was the Didact imprisoned originally?" John asked during a brief pause in Cortana's speech.

"From what I can understand, he wanted to use the Composer on humanity and remove us as a source of food for the Flood. He hates humans."

"We can't free him, then," Fred snorted. "Does Lanut really think we would reawaken a creature that just wants to destroy humanity?"

"They assume you'll do what you have to in order to ensure humanity's survival," Cortana said coldly. "I am not exaggerating in the least â€" in fact, I can hardly overstate this â€" when I say that Lanut could easily hunt down every human in this galaxy â€" and Sangheili as well, if he chose â€" and terminate all of you. You've lost three soldiers, and this was just a test, to see if you could even stand a chance of reaching the Didact's prison."

"Even if we wanted to surrender, we can't," John said, pushing aside his now-empty tray. "I don't have the authority to negotiate for the release of humanity."

"John." Cortana sounded slightly condescending, a new tone for her in John's experience â€" and it made him uncomfortably aware that there was no way to really tell if this was the real Cortana or a copy spun off by the Forerunner AIs. "You are literally the only UNSC official with any authority left on the offensive side. Admiral Hood, all of the brass, every soldier left on Earth has been very carefully rounded up and taken."

John shook his head, but he knew the AI was right. "What about the ill, injured, and weak?" he asked, recalling Captain Septima's original report. "Why did they kill those during the invasion?"

Now, Cortana sighed. "A mistake. The Glowsticks were given orders to capture all humans and leave only a few to regroup and lure us in. Those who couldn't make it to the ships weren't seen as ill or injured â€" they were resisting." John winced slightly. "Resistance meant death. Their technology is so far advanced from ours that they couldn't understand illness or injury as being any kind of handicap."

N'kane shook his head, mandibles clicking. "When one is born in Sangheili culture with a defect â€" physical or mental â€" they often do not survive long, but we do not sacrifice them. It is barbaric."

"But if you could cure any ailment, wouldn't you see weakness in other species as barbaric?" Cortana asked softly. "That's not the point. The point is, all of you are injured and exhausted. You need to rest â€" really sleep, I mean. The Glowsticks won't come onto the base for another eighteen hours."

Since everyone was fighting to stay awake, they took Cortana's word at face value. John picked up his helmet and went into the medical bay to talk to the AI alone while the rest went to the bunkers to sleep. Each was deeply asleep by the time they lay down, including the two Sangheili whose calves and hooves dangled off the edges of their chosen bunks. Amongst three thousand beds, though, the snores

of eight Spartans were lost to the cavernous space.

John set the helmet on a recently-cleaned examination table, taking a seat on another to face the helmet as though he could see Cortana. They were silent for a moment, each collecting their thoughts â€" though John was so tired he started dozing without realizing it, and only Cortana's voice pulled him back to the present.

"Well, Johnâ€¦ I'm sorry for your losses," she said quietly. "I'll update their records accordingly, and let Captain Septima know we'veâ€¦ run into a snag."

"Thank you, Cortana." John let his expression fall, assuming the blank face that would reveal nothing. "What are our options?"

"The only viable option would be to surrender, restore humanity to Earth, and then manage to revive the Didact and kill him before he Composes humanity." Cortana was completely serious. "Of course, if you choose not to surrender â€" and it must be a choice, John, and it can only be yours â€" the ancillas will start using their prisoners to try and free their master. You could also surrender and then get yourself killed trying to revive the Didact, but in that case, the ancillas would just come back toâ€¦ harvestâ€¦ more humans to keep trying. I think they have been taking soldiers throughout our history on this mission â€" look at all the legends and lore about aliens and glowing ships."

"I'm responsible for all of them, Cortana," John said softly.

"You're responsible for all of humanity, John," she answered. "That's always been a burden you've shouldered, ever since you realized just how big the Insurrectionist and then Covenant problems were. It wasn't yours to carry, but you did it anyway â€" and now, it has to be yours."

"Knowing the soldiers you leadâ€¦ It makes it harder." Cortana let the Chief talk, knowing he was working through his own guilt over Basky, Landsmen, and L'eto's deaths. "I knew about them as human beings, not just their strengths and weaknesses as soldiers. They weren't raised to sacrifice themselves. They had loved ones waiting for their return. Kelly's right â€" I shouldn't have gotten so friendly."

"Kelly's wrong," Kelly said firmly from the doorway, limping in. John immediately stood, lending her a shoulder and getting her seated on a table before she could open her stitches. Instead of letting him return to his seat, however, Kelly made him sit next to her so she could pull one arm around his shoulders in a gruff hug.

"I was wrong, John. Being cold towards the IVs wouldn't have made their losses any easier â€" and they might not have come along to save us from Solstice if you hadn't made friends of them, and then where would we be? We might not require the same amount of human contact most do, but we still need our friendships. You thought Fred and I â€" and everyone else â€" were dead and gone. I'm glad you made your friends, even if they are pains in the asses." She chuckled weakly, clearly still muzzy-headed from sleep. John wasn't sure what had woken her up, but he was glad for her company.

"And your civilian friends are just as important. When we die, no one will mourn us." Kelly's arm squeezed John's shoulders gently. "You will â€" you did â€" and Dr. Halsey will, and some of the UNSC brass will mourn the loss of such excellent soldiers, but who else will even notice our passing? We'll go out in a blaze of war and no one will ever think, 'Wow, that Kelly, she was faster than anyone â€" she once outran everyone else just to get a brownie.'" Both IIs smiled at the memories of training camp, where brownies had been a regular form of currency. "But when you die, Rebecca and Luke and Roger and all those other people from Yuray will mourn you, John. They'll remember snowball fights and parties with you. It kind of makes me jealous, to be honest."

John raised an eyebrow at this admission. "Jealous?" he asked softly, shaking his head. "It was all so simpler when I was just a soldier, Kelly. Don't be jealous of me."

"Simple isn't the Spartan way," she retorted. "Since when did you like simple?"

"Since simple meant taking orders and not having to gamble all of humanity against my team's lives," John answered, a flash of anger making his voice hard.

"But this is simple, compared to many of the missions we've been on," Kelly pointed out. "You've always gambled soldiers' lives against humanity's existence â€" it's just that now the stakes are higher, the cards are on the table and face-up, and you don't have anyone giving the orders."

They were quiet for a while, then Kelly sighed. "I can't tell you what to do, John. But if we spend the rest of what I bet will be very short lives fighting Glowsticks off this base for no gain other than because our military structure says you can't negotiate with terrorists, well, I just hope it's worth it." She gently lowered herself to her feet again and limped back out of the medical bay.

Cortana piped up almost immediately. "We have no laws for this situation, John. Not even close. The Covenant never had this kind of capability. Missing 99.9% of humanity surely means you can break a few laws."

"It's not that, Cortana," John said distantly, still watching the door through which his sister had disappeared.

"Then what is?" she asked, exasperated.

"If we surrender and resurrect the Didact, he will come back here and wipe everyone out anyway. You said it yourself â€" our technology can't compare to the Forerunners'."

"No, but our heart can," Cortana answered fiercely. "We're more creative. We have resources. And we can at least buy humanity enough time to rebuild a little, prepare for the Didact's return. Forewarning is worth a lot, John."

"Not when an ant has forewarning that a boot is about to squish it."



"You're being pessimistic."

"I'm being realistic."

"Go sleep, John. You need it, and you'll feel more up to talking again in a few hours. And I need time to sort through this information. If only you could seeâ€¦ John, the advances I could make to AIs aloneâ€¦"

John merely picked up the helmet and walked out to the bunkers, his body suit making him feeling strangely vulnerable even when he knew they could come under no attack for at least sixteen more hours. He collapsed into a bunk between Naomi on his right and Kelly on his left, Fred already having taken the bunk above him. Thus surrounded, John set his helmet on his chest so Cortana could wake him easily if necessary and crossed his hands over his stomach. He was asleep as soon as his eyes closed.

The Sangheili pair were the first to awaken, ten hours later, and their movement woke the Spartans quickly. They were all hungry again, but with the worst of the injuries stitched and set, they postponed going to the cafeteria in favor of the showers.

These were made to fit human standards, so only Lucy and the three remaining IVs could fit under the showerheads without crouching. Hot water was, however, enough of a luxury to them all that no one complained, and they all took longer than usual, even considering the care each took with their injuries.

"So, what's the plan today?" Kelly asked as they sat down to a very hearty breakfast, mostly made of dinner MREs from the supplies.

John tore open a packet of re-hydrated food and answered quietly. "Clean our armor and ensure the energy swords are functional. We will pile the dead Glowsticks to create barriers, and prepare for another attack."

"And when that attack comes?"

"We will defend this base. N'kane, we need those tanks operational â€¦ can you do it?"

The Sangheili shook his head slightly. "I am less versed in the operation of your mechanical vehicles that are land-bound than with Pelicans, but I believe the concept is the same. However, the mechanics with Captain Septima said their automobiles would not function, so I cannot say for sure."

"See what you can do. Automated turrets would be helpful. Cortana."

"Here, Chief," she said from his helmet, sitting on the table.

"Is it safe to plug you into the base's systems?"

"With the generator going, yes," she answered. "But I won't be able to help you-"

"You'll run the turrets, if we can get them working." John turned to the remaining Spartans. "We need to secure this base and block all of

the entrances but one." They nodded in agreement and everyone dug into their food, aware that they may not be able to eat again anytime soon, if the Glowsticks attacked.

Once finished, they trooped into the medical bay to clean and then assemble their armor. The two Sangheili used pieces of L'eto's armor to replace damaged parts on their own, and then they deposited the Elite's body in one of the freezers. If they survived and the fleet was rescued, someone would see his body back to Sanghelios.

With Basky and Landsmen already buried â€" John and Fred had found almost no parts worth saving from their armor â€" the Spartans were in a tight spot, in regards to armor. John put Cortana's chip into the bunker's main terminal and she powered up the various machines to test their reliability. Most were functional; only the more complicated ones, such as the portable health unit, had been affected by the Forerunner's EMP-like burst. With some help from Cortana, however, the Spartans did manage to sear closed their wounds and repair Kelly's internal bleeding.

Locked back into their armor, everyone felt more secure. N'kane and N'hamee went outside, armed with energy swords from the Promethean soldiers, and began working on one of the smaller tanks, hoping it might have only been subject to a short burst itself.

John, Tom, and Lucy worked together to weld all of the doors shut using equipment from the shed in which Fred had found shovels. Meanwhile, Kelly and Lazlakovic worked together to scavenge energy swords and fashion hilts to them made of pieces of metal pipe, and Fred took Naomi and Carter with him to stack the Forerunner armor to block off certain hallways, to prevent being flanked, and fill large rooms.

It was a maze of death when the Spartans were finished. They had less than an hour before their grace period was up; John ordered everyone to take a few minutes and eat something more.

N'kane had managed to get two of the automated turrets working again, but none of the tanks were operational. Cortana would control the automatic weapons at the entrance to the base, and the Spartans and Elites waited just inside that first doorway.

They could see the glowing Promethean army waiting just at the fence line, their energy swords sparking to life in a single movement as John's countdown timer ran out. They braced for assault, but first, the tall Promethean â€" Lanut, John reminded himself â€" appeared just in front of them. He didn't have his holographic pedestal this time, probably projecting from a distance.

"Greetings," he said calmly, observing the turrets that tracked to follow the least tick of movement with something like amusement. "I see that you have chosen the warrior's path. It is a sad waste of such incredible soldiers. We were hoping that your Cortana ancilla would be able to convince you of the folly of this course of action."

"She tried," John answered curtly. While not eager to get started with the slaughter â€" and eventually, it would be a massacre as the flesh-and-blood soldiers wore out against the Promethean machines â€" he disliked this Promethean more with every word it

hissed.

Lanut looked over the dirty, injured Spartans and Sangheili, shaking his head slightly. "Thus I told my comrades, but we may not interfere directly. Unfortunately, this puts us in a rather delicate position. You see, Demon, I need your team." John was surprised to hear the creature admit it; Cortana had given him the sense that the Forerunner ancillas were growing desperate, but laying it out flat at the negotiating table was never a good sign. "With you at their helm or not, I need your team. You are likely the only soldiers humanity has yet produced that could survive the trials required to reach the Didact's prison and release him."

"Why would we release a creature that just wants to Compose us all?" John asked.

"Because the alternative is the lose humanity \_anyway\_, except a select few we will keep to breed into future generations of Spartan-like soldiers that will open the Didact's prison. Perhaps we will harvest your bodies for genetic material, once you are all dead. We are a long-lived race, Forerunner ancillas. We can and will outlast your brief adventure through life. We are offering a simple contract â€" release our master, win back your race."

"And buy them a few years, at most? No, thanks," Lazlakovic spat.

"The Didact will, of course, wish to see humanity eradicated." Lanut shrugged. "Perhaps with our council, he will reconsider. We could beâ€" very good allies. Especially as your fleet was originally going to attack the Brute homeworld, which would have almost certainly ended in their extermination â€" the fleet's, I mean. The Brutes are not nearly so dumb as they would have you think, Demon, and they have beenâ€" \_very\_ busy with the weeks the War Chieftain bought with his life."

"\_Your\_ War Chieftain," John pointed out.

"Yes, well, a mistake. We were hoping the fusion of just enough human genetics would produce a hybrid able to open the Didact's prison, but to do so, we neededâ€" a field test. He failed, obviously â€" you are still alive." The being paused. "However, back on the subject of your surrender â€" and we need not call it that if it rises your hackles so â€" we will need an answer."

"You've had it since we first spoke," the Chief answered. "We will not surrender."

"Then I will have to resort to barbaric measures, as that seems to be the only kind of warfare to which you respond." There was a decidedly frustrated and evil tone to Lanut's voice now, and he gestured to a Promethean. Said Promethean stepped forward, causing all of the human and Sangheili soldiers to tense. However, its attention was not on the soldiers but on Lanut as the Forerunner ancilla spoke.

"Send your troops into the tunnels," the ancilla ordered. "Kill everyone you encounter. We will take no prisoners this time." The Glowstick stepped back obediently and then, to John's surprise, disappeared with a flash. "Would you like to watch?" Lanut asked, turning back to the Chief. "I am sure they will find your little

friend quite quickly. In fact, I have ordered that she be the first to die."

John snarled, drawing his energy sword. Lazlakovic caught his arm and pulled it back with her full weight, halting the movement. "Chief, stop," she hissed under her breath. "You're just giving it what it wants."

"Not really," Lanut drawled, doing something with his hands. A holoscreen popped up before the Spartans, split into five different screens — clearly the views from five Glowsticks. They were already in the tunnels, though John couldn't recognize where due to the lack of light.

"You said you have the fleet in a Slipspace bubble," Lazlakovic said, stepping forward. "Then you have our senior commanders."

"Yes," Lanut answered.

"Can you arrange a discussion between us and them?"

"In a matter of minutes." He seemed vaguely offended. "Is that what your surrender would require? Are you so bound by your laws that you cannot surrender yourselves to ensure humanity survives without someone giving you orders?"

"A society that disobeys its own laws, especially in times of crises, is no better than the Flood," Cortana hissed through John's loudspeakers.

Lanut shook his head in what seemed to be disappointment. "As I said, the choice must be yours. You cannot be ordered into a position in which to release the Didact by any circumstances of our making."

"That's not what we need," Cortana argued.

"What are you doing?" John hissed to the AI, turning off his external speakers.

"Saving humanity," she snapped back. "Now shut up and let me negotiate."

"Admiral Hood can give the Chief the authority he needs to make this decision. Otherwise, our hands are tied — and we don't break our laws as easily as you do yours." For some reason, this made Lanut flinch slightly, though if John hadn't been trying to burn holes through the Forerunner ancilla's holographic faceplate already, he would have missed it.

Lanut looked at the Chief, then at the two Sangheili. "And you, Sangheili? Would you require speaking to your Arbiter?"

N'hamee shook his head. "Our orders are to remain with the Chief. If he is given the authority and chooses to indulge you, Forerunner, we are sworn to follow."

"How — archaic." Lanut, with a definite smirk in his voice now, turned back to the Chief. "If you receive this — authority — you need from your Admiral, will you then consent to surrender yourself,

your team, and the AI Cortana to us, in return for all of humanity on board our ships, to be replaced in the cities from which they were taken in the same health as when they were taken, and the fleet to be returned to the space between Mars and Jupiter, with no casualties or missing persons?"

John frowned. Now he was really stuck in a quandary â€" before, he had been secure behind the wall of humanity's laws and the UNSC protocols for negotiating with terrorists and aliens. Now, however, he was being given a chance to save humanity â€" for a price that included, possibly, his brother and sisters' lives. But then, their lives had been forfeit since entering the Spartan program â€" they were soldiers.

"You will return both the human and Sangheili portions of the fleet," John said.

"Yes, of course. We have no interest in the Sangheili. They cannot open the seals."

"And you will call off your Glowsticks going after the refugees."

"As soon as you say the word."

"And if we fail to awaken your Didact?"

"Then we will consider the surrender completed and look for a next generation of super soldiers from humanity to complete the task."

John shook his head. "Humanity's future, guaranteed â€" those were the terms yesterday."

"Humanity would continue, under our protection," Lanut said quickly. "We would only require a few humans every generation. But to think you will fail isâ€¦ Not an intelligent move. Betting against you, John, has never profited us."

"We'll require more than that. If we fail, you will not return to Earth â€" or to any space claimed by humanity or inhabited by us or our allies â€" to harvest more soldiers."

"I don't see how you propose enforcing such terms when you are dead."

"You will write them into your code," Cortana answered quickly.

Lanut hesitated, but his own admission of desperation worked against him â€" John knew he had the upper hand now, even with humanity's future in the balance. "We are agreed," the ancilla said finally.

John paused a moment, then deactivated his sword. "Very well."

The holoscreen immediately switched from the view out of five Glowsticks' helmets to one John knew well â€" and he drew himself up into an automatic salute, the Spartans and Sangheili doing the same a brief second later.

Admiral Hood looked like he had aged a decade. The bridge behind him was quiet, though officers sat at their station. The admiral started up upon seeing the Chief, however, drawing the attention of others nearby. "John?" he asked incredulously.

"Sir," John answered, breathing out slightly. Being told the fleet was safe was one thing â€" seeing Admiral Hood, clearly alive and well, if not particularly happy. "Admiral Hood, per your orders, the \_Shadow of Veracity\_ made all possible speed back to Earth. We have encountered heavy resistance â€" most of humanity has been captured by Forerunner ancillas led by an ancilla named Lanut. They maintain an army of Glowsticks â€" Prometheans â€" on the ground. They are well armed and difficult to defeat."

"And the fleet can't go anywhere because the Forerunners are holding us, too?" Hood guessed shrewdly.

"Yes, sir. They require our cooperation in releasing an ancient Forerunner from a prison of his own kind's doing, which needs a human to unlock. I have been offered terms, sir, but I have no authority on which to act."

"What are the terms?"

John quickly explained the disappearance of Earth's population, Lanut's ultimatums, the Didact, and the offered terms. Admiral Hood's frown got deeper. "It sounds like a suicide mission, John."

"I believe it is, sir," John answered. "However, we are willing to attempt it â€" and then to kill the Didact before he can arrange to use the Composer on humanity, if any of us remain." This caused Lanut to stiffen, but not overly much â€" either he was certain that they wouldn't survive the opening or that the Didact would rip them all to shreds.

"What do you need?"

"A transfer of authority, sir," John answered carefully. "You cannot give me the order to make the surrender â€" it must be our choice, according to Lanut. All of humanity's leaders have been captured or are with the fleet â€" the same goes for Sangheili's."

"Acting Admiral?" Admiral Hood smirked slightly, leaning back in his chair. "That will tie the brass in knots for weeks. But it sounds like we have no choice. Though how this doesn't count as direct interferenceâ€"|"

Cortana interrupted the Admiral. "I know, sir, but we don't have a lot of time. We're staring down a Glowstick army at the moment."

"Very well. Chief, you know the vows and oaths we require of officers of the UNSC." John nodded, wondering to himself if he would \_ever\_ be a simple soldier again. "Uphold them. You've never failed humanity before. None of you have." Admiral Hood's gaze included the three IVs, two IIIs, and two IIs behind John, then moved to the Sangheili. "I have no authority over you two," he told them, "but I hope the Arbiter can forgive me for sending you with the Chief."

"We would be honored, Admiral," N'hamee assured him.

"Then you have it, Chief. Admiral," Lord Hood amended quickly. "I'll wrangle the legal side of this."

"Yes, sir," the Spartans barked. They didn't acknowledge that it was likely none of them would be returning home.

Admiral Hood saluted the team; they snapped to as well, and then the view screen went black and disappeared.

"I hope that you have the authority you need," Lanut said sourly. "Will you surrender, Demon?"

"As acting Admiral John-117 of the UNSC, I will surrender myself and my team, including the AI Cortana, in return for the restoration of humanity to Earth and the return of the mixed human and Sangheili fleet." John disliked the new rank's sound in his mouth even as he made the agreement, and he disliked even more surrendering his team like that.

"And you all agree?" Lanut asked informally, looking at the Spartans and Sangheili. They nodded, curt movements that bespoke how tense everyone was. "Very well, then. We will begin returning humanity immediately. If you would be so kind as to drop your weapons, we will provide you with better â€" and better armor â€" aboard."

"Go," John ordered, dropping his energy sword. "I will stay here to ensure the fleet is returned safely." Lanut simply nodded and motioned to the Glowsticks. They stepped up and led the Spartans, except John, and Sangheili pair away towards a transport sitting on the base's runway.

"You have made a wise decision," Lanut said after a few moments of silence. Transports began appearing in the sky, streaking overhead. "As promised. Those ships contain the humans we captured. They will be deposited back in their home cities. The fleet will be here within an hour, long enough to allow us to deposit all of our prisoners and bring you to our ships so you may confirm the fleet's safe arrival."

"And your code?" John asked gruffly.

"We have started writing a sequence that would match the terms you set forth," Lanut growled. "Your AI may even examine it to verify that our end of the deal is being upheld. In return, we expect you and your team to do your best to release the Didact from his prison."

"We agreed," John said simply.

"A little honest trust between enemies â€" is that too much to ask for in today's civilized years of warfare?" a new voice drawled. Another creature â€" holographic, and matching Lanut except for a faint definition of breasts about her torso, a higher voice, and paler armor â€" appeared. She looked John up and down, then shook her head slightly. "It was a poorly struck bargain, Lanut," she scolded the first ancilla.

Lanut snarled, clearly angry. "Your voice need not be heard, Athera,"

he snapped. "The deal is struck. We have what we want."

"At such a high price," she answered, gliding " the movement was so graceful John had no other word for it " over to a pile of Forerunner armor. "The soldiers we can replace, but there are three less bids to release our master."

"The weak fall first," Lanut said dismissively.

"They were not weak," John growled.

"They died," the ancillas both said simultaneously. They glared at each other, apparently forgetting the Spartan for a moment before Athera turned back to him. "Of course, we meant no disrespect. It is hard to know you and your team are going to be our last chance. I only hope the new arms and armor will improve your chances."

John shook his head. "We won't wear Forerunner armor," he said firmly. "You can repair ours or risk sending us in with damaged armor."

"You might want to reconsider," Cortana murmured in John's ear. "The specs I'm getting are| incredible."

"I don't want a Forerunner being able to control my armor from outside," John answered quietly, turning off his loudspeakers.

"They can't," Cortana protested. "There is no way that I can see|"

"Cortana, you already said they outstrip us in technology. You might not be able to see it."

Thus rebuked, Cortana fell silent. Athera mutely shook her head and looked at Lanut. "You would wait until the most stubborn human was in charge to secure the Didact's release," she spat, disappearing.

Lanut sighed. "Even Forerunner ancillas are ever doomed to the scorn of a spurned female," he sighed, looking up as another transport jetted past. "Have you seen enough, Demon, or shall we wait for more ships to appear?"

"I need to make sure the refugees are alive."

Lanut sighed again, clicking his clawed fingers in impatience. "To see a certain one of them, I suppose?" Before John could answer, and in the middle of the new acting Admiral's wondering why everyone seemed to attach special significance to his friendship with Rebecca, the Forerunner ancilla shook his head as though a fly buzzed around it. "Very well. Let it not be said I stood in the way of what may be your last farewell."

John felt his armor stiffen and tried to move instinctively, but was held fast. "Struggling disrupts the transition." Lanut's voice came through the same earpiece Cortana used to talk to John as his HUD's display went dark for a brief moment . However, before the Chief had time to process the loss of motor control, he felt his boots sink into soft dirt and his HUD glowed softly back to life, showing several friendly contacts " including Captain Septima, who was



staring at him with a rifle leveled.

"Chief?" she asked in surprise.

"Captain," John answered, carefully testing his motor functions. He stepped forward and gently lowered her gun. "You will find humanity has been restored," he told her. "The fleet is out beyond Mars and should report back soon."

"How?"

John shook his head. "Too long a tale for now. Lord Hood has named me acting Admiral for the time being." Captain Septima and every other former UNSC soldier immediately snapped into salutes, which John waved off quickly. "I'm taking my Spartans and Sangheili on a mission for the Forerunners. We are leaving three behind â€" Basky and Landsmen are buried on the base we secured, and L'eto's body is down in the bunker." Captain Septima nodded, bowing her head for a moment.

"I'll return their bodies to their families," she promised quietly. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know," John said, catching motion out of the corner of his eye as civilians began crowding around. "Likely, though, we won't be returning â€" and if we do, it means humanity will be facing a more deadly threat than any before."

"Isn't that always the way of things?" the captain joked weakly.

"Get everyone out of here and tell them to return to their lives," John ordered. "Go back to yours."

"Aye, sir." Captain Septima glanced behind her, then back at the Spartan. "I hope we see you again, sir."

"As do I," John replied softly, turning. He needed to report to Dr. Halsey.

He found her tent occupied by both women he had been hoping to see â€" Dr. Halsey exclaimed upon seeing the condition of his armor, and Rebecca started up from her seat next to the doctor as he pulled off his helmet to the older woman's command.

"It's nothing, ma'am," he said to Dr. Halsey, gently stopping her from trying to go after the first aid kit. "I've been patched already. I'm one of the best off."

Dr. Halsey eyed him critically. "You're leaking gel." John looked at the spot on his right side she pointed to, and sure enough, the suit was leaking. "What happened?"

"Glowstick army," John answered succinctly. "We lost Basky, Landsmen, and L'eto. Lanut â€" a Forerunner ancilla â€" has been behind this whole thing. He captured the fleet and took humanity hostage so we would come running." He growled, allowing the frustration at being used by an enemy so blithely to show now that he was with the doctor.

"What do they want with you?" Dr. Halsey asked. Despite the Spartan's protests, she passed his helmet to Rebecca, who held it gingerly, and examined John's armor for dangerous leaks, patching up the worst of it with deft hands used to working on the MJOLNIR.

"To revive the Didact," John answered. "Only a human can do it, and likely, only a team of Spartans can survive long enough to do it."

"Long enough?" Rebecca squeaked.

"We probably will not return," John told her carefully, aware that the words would likely cause a famous Rebecca-explosion.

Sure enough, they did. Rebecca's eyes blazed with anger. "You're throwing away your life â€" your team's lives â€" to revive a Forerunner?"

"It was that or sacrifice humanity to trial and error breeding programs," John snapped, disliking the insinuation that he would give up his life â€" and especially his sisters' and brothers' lives â€" for so little.

"John," Dr. Halsey said softly, warningly, as Rebecca set his helmet down on the doctor's desk carefully and ducked out, avoiding John's hand when he tried to stop her. The doctor sighed. "This is no time to be quarreling," she scolded.

"I know, ma'am," he said softly. "We negotiated for the return of the fleet and humanity, in health, to Earth."

"Good." Dr. Halsey bit her lip. "Such choices can never be made well, John. You lose too much either way."

"I chose the lesser of two evils," he replied. "A few Spartans and two Sangheili for humanity? There was no choice."

"There is always a choice, John. Now go find Rebecca and say you're sorry." Dr. Halsey handed him his helmet. "I'm sure you will be needed soon. Goodbye. I hope I see you again."

"Goodbye, Dr. Halsey." John turned and ducked through the tent, putting his helmet back on. It sealed with a gentle hiss.

Quickly, knowing Lanut could snatch him out of the camp whenever he wanted, he strode towards the Yuray refugees' tents, striding through without stopping to greet the few who recognized him and exclaimed to see him back already, and into Rebecca's tent without pause.

Before she could yell at him, however, John held up his hands. "I came to say I'm sorry," he told her.

"For snapping at me or for going on another suicide mission?" Rebecca asked, facing the back wall of the tent and refusing to turn around. Chichi lay half in her lap, head down, ears pressed flat to her skull. The dog didn't know what was causing her mistress distress, but she wanted to stop whatever it was â€" and presenting her furry, loving head for patting had always helped in the past.

John sighed quietly. "You know I can only apologize for one." \_Why

did I do this?\_ the Spartan wondered to himself as he carefully negotiated the confines of the tent to gently kneel behind Rebecca, reaching one hand to rest gently on her shoulder. "I didn't want to hurt you, Rebecca, I'm sorry."

Rebecca shook her head, turning slightly to press her forehead against John's chest armor. He was grateful he had cleaned it after yesterday's battle, or she would have gotten a face-full of his blood otherwise. "I know you have to go," she said softly. "And I know you did everything you could to save humanity, and that you think your life is a small price to pay for it. Just promise me you'll try to come home, alright? Even if it means releasing that Didact."

"I will," John promised. They sat for a moment quietly, then John heard Lanut's voice in his ear warning him it was time to go â€" sarcastically asking if he wanted more "private time." With a growl at the Forerunner ancilla, John gently squeezed Rebecca's shoulders and stood, drawing her up with him. "Goodbye, Rebecca," he murmured, hugging her carefully â€" both out of habit and because his armor \_was\_ still leaking hydrostatic gel.

"Goodbye, John. Give 'em hell."

Rebecca stepped back and John felt his armor freeze again. His HUD went dark even as Rebecca's eyes widened in surprise â€" John supposed she was seeing something happen like the tiny motes of golden light that had signaled a transport on the Halo rings.

His HUD came back to life in the inside of what was very clearly a Forerunner ship. The soft grey walls curved gently in ways that made the room seem larger than it should have been. To John's left as he appeared was a large window, and below it, the controls for what he assumed was the bridge's officer, though the small holographic blob of light zipping around on the tiny tabletop didn't acknowledge his arrival.

The rest of his team was already there. Silently, they turned to the viewport of the ship, where John could see a Slipspace bubble opening in the distance, just past Mars. Familiar UNSC and Sangheili ships began streaming out of it, and almost immediately, Cortana chirped, "Handshakes received. It's our fleet. They wish us luck."

"Are you satisfied?" Lanut asked, appearing in the middle of the small room â€" slightly shorter, but still towering over the Sangheili and Spartans.

John nodded, and the ship powered up around them, lights winking softly. He supposed the engine started, though he could hear nothing. "Then we will take our leave." The ship moved away from Earth and the fleet. The exterior viewport showed them one last vista of the green and blue planet from a distance even as the fastest UNSC ships approached the defense grid, squawking their identities over the radios that now crackled to life in John's helmet.

Then a Slipspace bubble opened, commanding their view as it swallowed the ship and its team of human and Sangheili soldiers.

## **\*\*Chapter 17 " Into the Abyss\*\***

The ship was silent around them. John missed the hum of a human ship's engine, the loss of gravity as he moved between floors. Since boarding, the Forerunner ancillas had mostly left the group alone to wander the abandoned halls of the small ship. The crew was either all in hiding from the team or the ship was completely crewed by AIs such as the little blob of light that stayed on the holoscreen in the bridge.

True to their word, however, the team hadn't even tried on the Forerunner armor stacked neatly in the armory they found on board. It looked pretty, and certainly was better than the MJOLNIR they had, but none of them wanted to risk being puppets to a Forerunner AI. Instead, Lanut had shown Cortana how to use a machine that could replicate anything mechanical. Between all of them, they had enough undamaged armor pieces to replicate a full suit that closely matched the Mark VII, and so the IIs and IIIs got upgraded. The IVs couldn't use the pieces from the GEN1 armor, but they managed to replace all of the parts of their own armor between the three of them.

There was a vast wall of the armory with several types of weapons hanging on it " at least, John recognized a section devoted to human rifles, shotguns, pistols, and grenades and another section devoted to Covenant weaponry. Most of the wall, however, was covered in energy weapons that looked like they belonged on Promethean armor.

Linda, her suit having taken the least damage and therefore fixed the most easily, chose a UNSC-issue sniper rifle, four shrapnel grenades, and a shotgun for close-up work. She also stored a Covenant-style energy sword handle in her thigh pocket. "We'll need medical and survival supplies," she said quietly, storing several clips of ammunition for both guns in a pocket opposite the energy sword.

John nodded in agreement, his arms raised to shoulder level so Naomi could make a couple final adjustments to his replaced chest piece. The replicator had even been able to modify it slightly to add an Admiral's stars to the front plates. The former Chief would rather have left it off, but Cortana had insisted " and Lazlakovic had backed up the AI's decision.

Tom and Lucy joined Linda at the wall of weapons, thoughtfully drifting towards the Forerunner section. "We could try some of these out, Admiral," Tom said quietly, lifting down what appeared to be a long, black rifle. As soon as he touched it, it glowed a deep red along several points in the barrel, apparently powering itself.

John eyed the weapons carefully. "We'll try them, but pack something you know, too," he finally agreed. If the Forerunner weapons could be turned on and off remotely, he didn't want to find them facing a threat without guns.

"There is a shooting range on board," Cortana said from John's helmet's loudspeakers. "You can try them there."

"Excellent." John lowered his arms and shifted slightly, testing the new chest piece. It fit perfectly, of course, and he modified the gel inflation slightly to a more comfortable level.

He had been the last to repair his armor, and now turned towards the wall of weapons. Kelly was looking over a super-compact pistol-like Forerunner weapon. Everything was in the same dull black color, glowing red when someone picked it up. N'hamee and N'kane were already outfitted with energy swords, a plasma rifle each, and several plasma grenades, though both were also eyeing small three-pointed grenade-like things.

"Bring one of everything," John ordered, hefting a black rifle-like gun that was slightly thicker than the one Tom had found. "Cortana, where is the shooting range?"

She displayed a map of the ship in his HUD, tracing the path in a red line. "Not far," she summarized, her voice distracted.

"What are you doing?" John turned his loudspeakers off to speak to Cortana alone in the confines of his helmet.

"Gathering intel," Cortana answered quickly. "I'm trying to sneak into the ship's systems. But these Forerunner AIs, even the stupid ones, are just stupid enough not to challenge Lanut and his crew. They can just about out-process me, so I'm trying to act like a maintenance AI to get into the system."

"What do you plan to do once you're inside?"

"Figure out where we're going and what is waiting for us there," she replied.

John simply nodded, turning down a corridor. The ship wasâ€¦ Well, the only way he could describe it was "airy" â€" it had a largeness to the halls, a consequence of the soft grey color and curving architecture, that made John cringe inwardly. A single direct hit and the whole thing would crumple.

They reached the shooting range, a room longer than John had been expecting but only wide enough for three people to stand abreast. They opened the double-wide doors and Tom, Lazlakovic, and Linda stepped up to the range first. Fifty yards away, three targets appeared, at about a third of the room's maximum range.

Linda sighted on her target, using a thick pistol-like weapon. She held it firmly as she fired, and the kick-back hardly rocked her. The target, a simple human silhouette made of some sort of metal alloy, lost its head.

"I like it," the II murmured, turning the gun over. "Very little kickback for that much power. But I don't particularly like pistols as a rule."

"I do," Tom said, offering her the long rifle. "This seems to be a sniper rifle of some sort â€" check out the scope's zoom." Eagerly, Linda handed over her pistol and hefted the rifle, sighting on the headless target once more.

This time, the kickback was pronounced â€" Linda rocked slightly. "It connects to our HUDs automatically," she reported, lowering the rifle. The target was completely gone, the shot having disintegrated the metal. "Not bad. I like it. Though I guess it makes all those years of practice irrelevant, if it just disintegrates the

target."

"How much ammunition can you carry for it?"

"More than for a human sniper rifle, that's for sure," she responded, taking the power source of the rifle. "My HUD says this thing gives me two shots at once, and I could carry half a dozen replacement packs." John nodded, well pleased â€" though he was still worried they could be turned on and off remotely.

Tom, meanwhile, fired three shots in rapid succession from the small pistol in his hands, then turned it over. "Good heat dissipation," he said quietly. "If it produces heat, which it has toâ€¦ I think." He smiled slightly. "Of course, Forerunners seem to bend the laws of physics without problems."

"How about this one?" Lazlakovic asked, bringing up the slightly thicker rifle. She fired a three-round burst. "Thirty-six round magazines, and I could probably carry four clips." She looked at the target, which had a neat three-shot group centered on the forehead.

Everyone tried all three unique weapons, and decided that Tom would take one of the pistols â€" which he decided to call a Boltshot for the way it shot concentrated bolts of hard light. It also had a charged burst like the Covenant plasma pistol. Though rather less powerful than the rifle, it was a good backup weapon.

Linda took one of the Forerunner sniper rifles, replacing her UNSC-issue one, and Naomi gave it its own name, the Binary Rifle, to refer to the two accelerator barrels that shot the hard light from the rifle.

After trying the rifle-like weapons, everyone chose to use a Forerunner weapon as either a primary or secondary weapon. Carter took a weapon Kelly named the Incineration Cannon, which fired four streams of explosive light, which, upon impact, split into individual streams and rebounded into nearby targets, detonating again with a lesser impact. He could only carry a couple rounds for it, and it didn't fire quickly, but if they ran into a tank or something larger than a basic Promethean, or needed to get through an obstacle, it would surely come in handy.

Naomi, Kelly, and Lucy took a close-range shotgun-like weapon, which Naomi called the Scattershot, which could fire a number of projectiles towards a single target. Though they could only carry twenty rounds for it, its close-range lethality made it an excellent back-up weapon.

Fred, John, Lazlakovic, and the two Sangheili took what Lazlakovic affectionately called the Lightrifle, which she had shot first, and seemed to be the Forerunner's idea of a basic combat rifle.

The Sangheili pair took Covenant plasma pistols as their backup weapons, and then added three plasma grenades and a pair of human shrapnel grenades to their arsenal. Similarly, the Spartans chose primary or secondary weapons as necessary, and added a few grenades each.

Kelly was eyeing the Forerunner grenades back at the armory as

everyone rechecked their weapons and ammunition. "How much damage do you think these do?" she asked, holding one in her palm. "I don't want to test it on board."

"According to the specs I can read," Cortana answered from John's helmet, "they're better than plasma grenades. They produce an ionization pulse. They're called the Z-040 Attenuation Field Generator."

"That's a mouthful," Carter muttered.

"I want a few. They might come in handy." Kelly stocked her grenade belt with four of the diamond-shaped things.

The two Sangheili and Spartans lined up then for an inspection, standing to attention as John ensured his team was outfitted and complimented each other's choices. He told Carter to take more ammunition for his Cannon and leave behind his grenades instead. After a couple similar adjustments "the group wasn't used to working with others who could keep up and carry as much" he was satisfied.

"Leave your gear here until we arrive," the Spartan II ordered, setting the example. He realized he had no idea where they were going, or how long it would take to get there. Eager to answer at least some of his questions, John headed back towards the bridge after dismissing the rest of the team to find a place to bunk down and get some well-earned rest.

Once back on the bridge, John addressed the little mote of light that seemed to run the ship's basic functions. "Where is Lanut?" he asked it.

"You may address me," Lanut answered, a tiny hologram of his black form appearing on the deck. "You have questions, I assume. To answer a few of them, allow me to assure you that, while aboard this ship, you will not be subject to any harm from any creature under my control or with my knowledge. We will arrive at our destination in just over six of your hours, and our destination is a prison world designed to hold the Didact, called Requiem. As per our agreement, we will set you and your team on the planet in a location that will offer you minimal initial resistance. Thereafter, it is your mission to release the Didact "and it will be perilous. There will be Prometheans and worse."

John nodded slightly. "And your Glowsticks can't clear the way, I'm assuming."

"Correct. We cannot provide material aid to you once you have accepted the mission, apart from replacing that which is damaged in order to improve upon your chances of survival. While watching your team in the armory, I noted that you have all opted to carry several lower-grade human and Covenant weapons. This will be a disadvantage upon the field." The tiny hologram tilted its head "either in concern or anger" and regarded John coolly.

"Diversity in weaponry is one of humanity's strongest assets in the field," John replied. "I don't trust your guns."

"Of course." The ancilla shook its head. "You may find the weapons

discarded by the prison's guards to be of more value, howeverâ€|"

"Thank you for the advice." John interrupted the being quickly. "If you want us to be in top shape for your mission, we're going to need supplies â€" food, medicine, water, supply dumps."

"We can provide each of you with a backpack of food suitable to your organic processes," Lanut replied, gesturing towards the interior of the ship. "They will be in the armory when you are ready to retrieve them. However, we cannot offer supply dumps. You will have to carry in everything you expect to use, though you are welcome to take weapons from guards if you can."

"Then we'll want mostly water and biofoam."

"We will provide such items. If that is allâ€|"

John nodded curtly and left the deck even as the hologram faded again. The bridge AI, apparently relieved to have its bridge back again, chattered at John's back as the door closed, but he couldn't understand what it was saying.

"Six hours," he told the Spartans and Elites when he got to the bunking room his team had appropriated. "We're going to a Forerunner prison world called Requiem."

"We should rest until then," Fred suggested. John nodded in agreement.

"Until we return to Earth," the Chief â€" Admiral â€" ordered, ignoring the niggling thought in his mind that it was a question of if, not when, "no one removes their armor. We're in a hostile zone."

Everyone agreed readily, though they had all grown more accustomed to seeing each other's faces. They then settled into the bunks â€" built to accommodate something larger than Spartans in full battle armor â€" and decided on watch shifts. Though Lanut had given his sworn word that nothing would attack them, John wasn't about to trust the Forerunner ancilla, as much as possible.

\_~~Six hours later~~\_

Lanut appeared in John's HUD, apparently unconcerned that he had just hacked into the MJOLNIR's systems, displaced Cortana's avatar in John's field of view, and addressed the Admiral. "There is a ship awaiting a pilot in the hangar bay," he said without preamble. "The controls have been reconfigured for N'hamée. I trust you are well equipped."

"Yes," John answered, hoping the Forerunner ancilla couldn't totally hack into the suit's systems and â€" perhaps â€" cause it to lock down. "Get out of my suit," he growled.

The Forerunner ancilla disappeared and Cortana's avatar reappeared. She was bright red with anger. "How dare heâ€|Arg!" The wordless expression of frustration and anger made it clear that Lanut was still treating her like a lowly dumb AI, which compared to him, she was. "If it's the last thing I doâ€|"



"Cortana," John interrupted, waking his comrades who were still asleep. They had taken one-hour watches each, so everyone had a good five hours of decent sleep, and everyone felt fresher for it.

"Sorry, Chief â€" Admiral." She smirked slightly when John grunted in displeasure at the new rank.

"To the armory," he ordered the team as they rose. They quickly gathered their chosen weapons, hoisting backpacks that had appeared "overnight" and filled with several canteens of water, made of a substance John couldn't readily identify, biofoam canisters, and hard-packed trail rations. Everyone, at Cortana's insistence, ate one of the bars before strapping the bags to each other's backs where they wouldn't interfere with drawing weapons or grenades.

John chewed the sticky-sweet bar of energy. It resembled nothing like he had tasted before, though it was sweeter even than the cake he had enjoyed at Rebecca's on several occasions, a different kind of cloying sweetness that clung to his tongue. He rolled his tongue against the roof of his mouth several times, trying to dislodge the tacky feeling, but it hardly helped.

"Ugh." Kelly pulled her helmet off again and grabbed a canteen of water from a pile of them â€" clearly placed for immediately consumption â€" to swallow a mouthful. The bars of "food" were clearly not agreeing with her as well.

"It's super-dense food that will provide the calories and staying power of a full meal," Cortana explained.

Carter hiccupped and then burped, causing him to groan slightly as his stomach rebelled against the super-rich food. "Cortana, we've eaten cardboard for most of our lives," he complained, taking the canteen from Kelly when she offered it and downing a few swallows thirstily. "My taste buds have forgotten the taste of honey â€" if that's what that sweetness was. It could be some Forerunner thing we haven't even heard of."

"It's better than having to carry UNSC food," Cortana replied, unapologetic. "You can digest it."

"Not easily," the Spartan IV grumbled. "I'll be pooping bricks for a week."

"Carter," John said warningly. They were on a mission â€" it was not the time for Marine-like joking around.

The IV nodded in understanding, straightening, but the Chief â€" Admiral â€" knew that his apparent cheerfulness, muted though it was, was his way of dealing with the deaths of his comrades and their new situation.

They went in silence to the bay and found the ship Lanut had had prepped for the team. It was a silver-grey color, sleek and beautiful, with several hovering sections. Upon their approach, a door slid silently open, beckoning them into a well-lit interior.

N'hamee sat in the pilot seat in the bridge and it conformed to hold him in a slightly more vertical position than a true chair. The rest of the team took their own seats, which similarly adapted to their bodies and armor.

"Ship responding," N'hamee reported, his hands deft as the ship powered up around them. "We've got clearance to take off."

"Take us down, N'hamee," John ordered. "Lanut should have the coordinates programmed in for us."

"Yes, sir," the pilot replied. The ship responded admirably, smoothly taking them out of the ship " and its artificial gravity field " and into space. They all felt the increase in gravity as they approached the planet, a seemingly metal thing covered in Forerunner symbols.

It opened at their approach and the gravity well increased, sucking the ship towards them. "We're going to crash-land, sir," N'hamee reported quietly, his calm voice at odds with the quick movements his hands made to the ship's controls. "The gravity well is too strong."

"We'll be alright." Everyone in the ship agreed " they had all survived crashes before.

They fell in silence, the stresses of gravity making the ship groan around them. The planet they were approaching " John assumed it was a planet, though it seemed to be inside the metal sphere they had first thought was Requiem " was covered in patches of blue, green, and brown, much like Earth. They were headed for the main landmass, and as they got closer, John could see the tell-tale shadows of mountains as the source of light " somewhere behind them " lit the day side of the planet.

"Prepare for the crash," N'hamee yelled through gritted mandibles. They spun wildly, their own inertia almost causing the restraints in their seats to snap, but somehow, they held the heavily armored Spartans in place.

The impact with the ground was nothing more than another lurch, but this one more powerful, and it was the last. They impacted on the tail of the transport, causing everyone's heads to snap backwards against the seat's headrests.

John tasted blood in the back of his mouth as the ship shrieked in pain and tipped forward. The Spartan II slapped the release on his harness and stumbled slightly as the chair let him fall, but caught himself. The rest of the team did the same, except Linda, who hung against her restraints. John checked her vital signs " she was alive, her pulse erratic, and there were signs of a concussion.

"We'll take her with us," John ordered, releasing her harness and arranging himself so that she fell forward onto his shoulder. Kelly immediately stepped forward to shift Linda slightly so the Admiral could still reach at least one of his weapons with his free hand.

Carrying a ton of Spartan and armor was no joke, even for another

Spartan, but John knew he couldn't leave his sister behind, especially when they had no clue what could be awaiting them on the planet.

N'hamee forced the door open; it had nearly been sealed shut by Pelican-sized pieces of shrapnel. He and Lazlakovic cleared the immediately vicinity, kneeling at the edges of a cleared spot near the door and watching outwards for any signs of attack.

John set Linda down and removed her helmet, taking a canteen of water from his pack to splash a little on her face. She came to sputtering, sitting up slightly before John could pin her down to keep her neck still. "Hold still," he ordered, gently probing along her neck to feel for broken bones. "You have a concussion from the crash."

"Can't see straight," she muttered, trying to focus her eyes on his face. Wordlessly, John held up a hand, extending two fingers "three" and the Admiral shook his head. "Guess the sniper's out for a while," his sister said humorlessly, reaching for her helmet. "I'll be good to go in a bit, Chief. Admiral."

John nodded, standing up and offering his sister a hand. She levered herself to her feet, shaking her head to clear it, but ended up overcorrecting and listed to the left. Kelly shot forward to nudge her back upright.

"Thanks," Linda murmured, sliding her helmet back on. "I'll be fine in a few, Chief. Admiral."

John motioned for Kelly to support the listing sniper Spartan. They would be down two fighters until Linda could see straight again, which wouldn't take long.

Now John turned his attention to their surroundings, though his team had already set down observation points on a perimeter, keeping their wounded Spartan protected.

"This whole place is going to be a beacon for any hostiles," Fred said, scanning the hills around them with his rifle.

"Trade," John ordered, handing him Linda's Forerunner sniper. "Linda needs a few minutes."

"Yes, sir," Fred answered, taking the sniper and handing the Admiral his rifle. Fred was second-best at everything, including being a sniper. John gave the rifle to Linda; though she couldn't see straight enough yet to shoot accurately, she could at least carry it.

"Carter, Naomi, take point." The two Spartan IVs moved ahead of the group and crouched, waiting for the rest of them to form up. "Fred, N'hamee, to the sides. N'kane, you're with me on the six. Kelly, keep Linda in the middle and moving forward."

They moved out, keeping their distance from each other but staying within eyesight as they wound through the canyons. Without a map, John was directing them away from the giant bullseye the crashed ship made on the landscape.

"Cortana, any help from Lanut?" John asked as they rounded a valley and found themselves at the edge of a cliff.

"No, he's unresponsive," Cortana answered. "But if this is a prison world, where are the guards?"

John nodded in agreement "so far, they hadn't encountered anything but a few scattered bits of debris. They were moving quickly away from the crash site, but the cliff edge gave them pause. Nearly fifty meters out and several hundred meters down, a massive building beckoned. Above it floated giant spears, Forerunner ships, apparently in what passed for dry dock. The complex was the same silver-grey as everything else built by the Forerunners, and appeared flat from their angle. The towers, however, were lost in the clouds above.

"Down the face or along the edge?" Cortana asked as John looked down the five hundred meter drop.

"We'll be exposed both places," John replied, frowning. He motioned to Kelly. "Scout to the east," he ordered, marking a NAV point on his HUD and sending it to her. "Five kilometers out, then come back."

"Yes, sir." She took off running along the cliff edge. John gave the same order to Carter, who ran in the opposite direction. Linda was finally able to stand and move on her own, though her vision was still a little fuzzy. The team crouched in the cover provided by a slight rise in the terrain.

Kelly returned first, panting slightly. "No way down that way," she reported. "The cliff seems to extend that way as far as I could see, and starts looping northwards."

John simply nodded. They waited for Carter to return; he wasn't long. "I found a way down, I think," he reported, waving to the west. "Three kilometers that way. The wall is curved, and it doesn't look natural the further you get."

John nodded. "We'll go down the path," he decided.

Carter led the way. It was wide enough for three Spartans to pass abreast, but they went single-file, spread out. Linda followed quietly, focusing mostly on keeping herself moving forward and not running into the Spartan in front of her. She was improving rapidly, though, and peered at the structure and the ships towering over it.

The team made it to the bottom of the cliff face quickly and without incident. Everyone was still on high alert, however, as they fanned out at the base of the pathway which turned into a tamped-dirt road leading into the structure's base. There was no visible door, but when the group approached the building, a panel directly ahead of them receded, allowing them apparently unrestricted access into the base.

"Eyes sharp," John ordered, taking point. Fred exchanged Linda's sniper rifle back to her for his original rifle, as she was able to see clearly again, and then followed into the base's interior.

The walls and ceiling were sleek and smoothly finished, the floor a grate that held them suspended above a maze of wires and pipes. "Looks like any old military base, except cleaner," Cortana commented quietly. "I can't read anything â€" wait, scratch that, your motion tracker is picking something up."

John had already noted the red dot â€" enemy â€" and held up a closed fist, telling his team to move towards the walls and crouch. They would surprise whoever â€" whatever â€" it was, and hopefully get some information about what they were facing.

A Promethean rounded the bend ahead, five meters ahead of John. It closely matched those that had been on Earth, except it was older-looking, somehow. Perhaps the pause in its movements before it attacked, or the slightly less elegant armor it wore, told John this was a predecessor to Lanut's Prometheans.

Either way, the thing didn't get far â€" Linda fired her sniper just a fraction of a second behind Kelly, and with the two combined, the Promethean wailed and exploded into what appeared to be chunks of data, but those dissipated. John went over to the remains and shifted through the pile â€" he picked up the creature's weapon, a Lightrifle, and it assembled in his hands. He put it back down, more comfortable, for now, with his original choices. They would scavenge weapons when it became necessary.

That Promethean had clearly been an outlying guard â€" they moved further into the base and continued to encounter single patrols, and once, a pair of Prometheans on guard.

"I don't like this," Cortana muttered as they trooped down a thin hall. "There are too many ways around here â€" we could be getting flanked as we speak." John agreed silently; he was nervous about the maze-like building. "And there isn't nearly as much resistance as Lanut would have had us believe. Could we be in the wrong place?"

"Or maybe we're going the wrong way," John replied. "It would have been nice to get a map, at least."

"Well, I can tell you that there is a weird energy signature coming from here." She dropped a NAV point on his HUD, leading through a wall to John's left. It was five hundred meters, as the worm dug, to the south-southwest. "And here, there seems to be a rather odd gathering of Prometheans â€" I think. And finally, I believe there should be an engineer room â€" where I can gain access to the system â€" here."

"We'll split up," John decided, halting the group. "Lazlakovic, take Linda, N'hamee, and Carter to this location." He sent them towards the energy signature Cortana had first marked. "Fred, take Tom, Lucy, and N'kane here â€" Cortana says there is a gathering of Prometheans, so be careful." The Lieutenant saluted and led his soldiers off quickly, backtracking a bit to find an open door. "Kelly, Naomi, with me." They would take Cortana to the engineering room.

## 19. The Prison

**\*\*Chapter 18 â€" The Prison\*\***

John's team ran into their first triple-Promethean patrol. This time, however, there were two of the upright triangular Prometheans and one dog-like creature which howled at their approach, apparently summoning something because Cortana yelled, "Kill it quickly!"

Without asking, John put several rifle rounds through the creature's head, muting the call. It was already too late, however, as a swarm of similar dog-like Prometheans charged from around the hall, baying their attack as they shot the Forerunner pistols called Boltshots. John dropped to one knee; Kelly and Naomi shot over his head and their three rifles filled the hallway with deadly projectiles.

The two upright Prometheans â€" Knights, Cortana called them â€" attacked at the same time. John put nearly a full magazine in the closest one and then switched to his secondary pistol, finally taking the hulking creature down. Kelly accounted for the second with a blast from her Scattershot, and Naomi took out two of the dog-like Prometheans with her own Forerunner shotgun.

Once the hallway was empty again, John took a closer look at one of the less-damaged Promethean dogs. It had died after Kelly's Scattershot took half its head off, but the nearby intact head of another one gave John a full picture. They were four-legged, hence his original idea of calling them dogs, with clawed toes and an ant-like mandible for a head. They wore the same glowing armor the Promethean Knights did.

"They're called Crawlers," Cortana announced. John could feel her accessing information â€" from where, he didn't know â€" about their new enemy. "They're quadrupeds, hunting in packs. These ones chose close combat, but they do know how to work closely together and can even do long-range combat, so be careful. The Alphas have Suppressors â€" the one that called originally, with the spines, is an Alpha. These are all just regular Crawlers. There's also apparently a Snipe â€" those are the long-range bastards."

"Where is this information coming from?" John asked suspiciously. Cortana hadn't been able to get them much information before, so where was it coming from now?

"A rather lonely maintenance AI traded it for information from the outside world," Cortana answered unabashedly. John blinked.

"Lonely?" he repeated.

"Yes, John, lonely. We do get lonely, you know." She sounded rather testy. "He just wanted something new to work through."

"You didn't give him anything classified, did you?"

"Give a girl some credit." Now Cortana sounded just slightly miffed. "I gave him some old Earth movies to watch."

"How many?"

"Eighteen terabytes."

John just shook his head in both amusement and wonder. "I guess even the Forerunners can fall victim to greedy personnel."

"It's not greedy to want something new after so many years repairing a barely-functioning ship that's been in dry dock for millennia."

John simply let the subject drop, picking up a Lightrifle from one of the Knights and taking its ammunition. "Let's keep moving," he suggested. "Warn the others about the Crawlers."

"Yes, sir," Cortana answered, a touch snarkily. John would have to talk to her. Now, however, was not the time.

They continued forward. The resistance increased â€" Naomi nearly lost an arm when a wave of Crawlers separated the group and started chewing with their mandibles. They learned that the dog-like Prometheans could â€" and did â€" use melee attacks. Thankfully, the hallways of the building restricted the packs more than it did the three Spartans, though both sides had incredible coordination and teamwork skills.

"Well, this is easier than I thought it would be," Kelly muttered over the radio.

"Don't jinx it," Lazlakovic answered. The sound of gunfire was clear over her radio.

"Resistance is futile, bitches," Carter grunted. It sounded like something was tearing at his armor; he groaned and the radio clicked off.

"Carter is injured," N'hamee reported. He grunted as he lifted something â€" likely Carter. "One of the Alpha Crawlers bit through his armor into his shoulder. We've come to our objective and have barricaded ourselves inside the room, which appears to be filled with generators, definitely Forerunner in origin."

"See if you can get them running," Cortana suggested through the comm. "Maybe it'll give us a map."

Linda clicked her green acknowledgement light. John clicked his yellow light twice at Fred, the silent order for a status update.

"We've found the gathering of Prometheans," Fred responded immediately, his voice strained. "There'sâ€¦ a lot of them."

"Can you tell why they're there?" Cortana asked.

"They seem to beâ€¦" Fred paused and there was the sound of heavy gunfire. He continued, "Guarding something, I guess. We've been forced to retreat to keep from being flanked. Couldn't get near their central location."

"Keep trying," John ordered. "We're nearly to engineering."

The team rounded a corner and came to a three-way junction. They took the left fork and immediately ran into another patrol of Crawlers. Though the Spartans had the element of surprise, the Crawlers worked

very well together and quickly set up an effective resistance that gave time for the Alpha to call in more troops.

John looked behind them as Naomi suddenly cried out in pain, the sound coming over her loudspeakers which she generally left on. The Spartan IV was down, a Crawler chewing at her helmet. She wasn't moving.

Kelly struck first, knocking the Crawler off her teammate's chest, and then bending down to assess her condition. "Snapped neck," Kelly reported, shaking her head. John fired into the crowd of Crawlers, their shields sparking.

"Retreat," John ordered, throwing Naomi's limp body over one shoulder. He wouldn't leave her behind, if he could help it.

Kelly cleared the way and they ran, choosing speed over care as they charged through patrols of Knights and Crawlers, leaving some still alive in their wake.

"Just ahead," Cortana said into John's ear. "Bar the door and get me into the system so I can find us a map."

John did as the AI told him, inserting her chip into a small slot in the side of what looked like a very complex computer, at least to his eyes. Kelly closed the door and shot out the opening panel â€" hopefully, that would hold them.

Only then did the two Spartans allow themselves a moment to reload their weapons and set Naomi down gently. Her head and helmet lolled to the side, and John policed her weapons before removing her helmet and closing her eyes.

"Fred, Lazlakovic, report," John ordered, taking the brief interlude to regain his breath and recenter himself.

"Lazlakovic's down," Linda reported. "Crawler. It wasn't pretty. We had to leave her. N'hamee got the generators going, I think â€" they're making sounds, at least. We're neck deep in Prometheans, though."

Fred came in next. "N'kane is badly wounded, but alive. We've retreated back to the original splinter location and are making our way to you. Whatever Cortana sent us after, it's too well guarded for just us, but if we all storm it, we should stand a better chance."

"Naomi is dead," John told everyone over the radio. "Cortana believes she can get us a mapâ€"|" "

Cortana interrupted him. "I have one. Uploading to your HUDs now."

A picture came to life on John's HUD, showing the layout of the base. He focused on it, noting the larger rooms that Cortana had tagged as generators, armories, and other valuable points of interest. "The prison is several "floors" down," the AI continued. "We'll have to pass through with these lifts. Those generators you put together make this possible." She highlighted several key points on their HUD maps. "Your teams can rendezvous here," she continued, highlighting one of the lifts.



"Can you call off the Prometheans?" John asked.

"No, they are independently programmed to eliminate anything that attempts to infiltrate this base. Yank me, Admiral, let's get going."

"Don't call me that," John growled into his helmet as soon as the AI chip was back in the slot at the back of his helmet.

"You are an Admiral," Cortana replied.

"Temporarily," John replied quickly. "Admiral Hood gave me the stars so I could make the surrender."

"You're fooling yourself. Brass has been wanting to kick you up the line for a long time."

"They retired me."

"John? Are you two having a conversation or can we go?" Kelly asked, nudging her brother with her shoulder. The Spartan shook his head slightly.

"Let's go," John ordered. "Team, rendezvous here." He marked the lift closest to Fred's group, since they had wounded. "We're going down."

Kelly crouched by the door. The Prometheans on the other side were pounding away at it, just about to break through by the sound of it. "Ready?" she asked, checking her Forerunner Lightrifle again.

"Good to go," John replied, storing the grenades Naomi had been carrying in an empty ammo pouch. He would leave her body there "if they made it out alive, they could retrieve it. If not, it was as good a final resting place as any."

"Here they come."

The door broke apart at last and both Spartans filled the breach with bolts of hard light. Crawlers screeched as they died by the handful, and the pair of soldiers dashed through the gap it left them, right into the faces of two Promethean Knights. Kelly tackled them and John shot both in the head as they passed.

Then they were through and sprinting down another hallway. John slung the Lightrifle and pulled out his pistol. Kelly pulled ahead and met the next group of targets first, jumping two Crawlers first. She pulled them from the main group and landed hard on one of them, crushing it under her armor. The other, she punched until its shields flickered and died and then she ripped its head off of its neck.

John shot a few of the Crawlers point-blank and then primed and dropped one of the Forerunner grenades. "Grenade," he told Kelly, pulling her back on her feet. The pair sprinted away and the grenade detonated.

"We're at the lift," Fred reported as the pair of Spartan IIs rounded a corner.

"We're nearing your position," John replied. He tossed a grenade behind him as the sound of another pack of Crawlers got closer. They fled, screeching, clearly recognizing the Forerunner object.

Kelly and John met Fred's group where they were holding the lift access door, waiting for Linda's team to arrive. While the last group made their way to their ride down into the planet, John checked on his teammates. N'kane had lost his left arm below the elbow; the remainder of the limb was wrapped tightly to prevent him from bleeding out, though he had used his own energy sword to cauterize the wound.

"One of the Forerunner Crawlers," the Elite explained. He was slightly pale from blood loss, and his voice was more wavery than normal, but he could still hold a pistol and insisted on continuing.

Linda's group finally arrived at the forefront of the largest pack of Crawlers and Knights yet. The Spartans and Elites had no cover and were forced to retreat under the heavy Forerunner fire, but not before Linda caught a bolt of hard light to the back. Her shields, already down from previous fire, couldn't save her armor, and it hardly saved her life. John caught her as she was flung forward with the force of the bolt, backing both of them into the room. Fred, Kelly, Carter, and N'hamee arranged themselves around the doorway, ducking out to fire into the crowd of Crawlers that tried to rush inside, keeping them at bay.

John gently set Linda down on her stomach, assessing the damage. Half of the armor covering her right side and shoulder was badly melted, clearly crushing the body underneath. He tripped the emergency release and lifted the panels away, his sister hissing slightly in pain as he peeled the black bodysuit from her burned skin.

One look was all he needed " she needed immediate medical attention. Carter was suddenly beside him, unpacking a syringe and filling it with a clear liquid. "For the pain," he explained, injecting it just below the Spartan's neck. John knew he had to hold the door with his fellow Spartans, but seeing his sister so wounded made him want to stay with her.

"Go," Linda coughed, shivering involuntarily as N'kane gently " as gently as possible, that was " used his remaining hand to clean the wound with Carter's help. "I'll be fine."

John knew she was lying " her voice was always at its most deadpan when she lied " but also knew he had no choice and took Linda's Forerunner sniper rifle. He lay on the right side of the door; Kelly stood over him, occasionally ducking out to fire on a few of the more adventurous " or stupid " Crawlers that tried to sneak closer. John concentrated his fire on the Promethean Knights when they ducked out from the other end of the hallway, where they had taken refuge.

Fred and N'hamee set up an easy rhythm as they waited for Linda's diagnosis. The Crawlers eventually gave up the idea of storming the Spartan territory, at least until they got reinforcements, and settled for trading potshots with the humans and Elite. With no clear winner " the Spartans and N'hamee had better aim, but there were

more Crawlers who took advantage of any pause in return fire with a suicidal charge â€" it would be down to a matter of who ran out of ammunition first.

Carter finally returned to the doorway. "Linda is stable," he reported. "But she can't move her right arm, or breathe well. N'kane is going into shock. Both of them need medical attention, more than we can give here."

John nodded to show he had heard and fired at a Knight, but the Promethean's shields protected the piece of shoulder that had been showing. The machine jerked back out of John's sight and the Admiral waited patiently as he gave his orders.

"N'hamee, Carter, take Linda and N'kane out of here," he ordered. "Get them above ground and back to the ship â€" see if the med kit is salvageable. If not, get a comm out to Earth and tell them to send the fastest ship our way. We have no idea where Requiem is in relation to Earth, but it only took the Forerunner ship six hours to get here, so it won't take a Sangheili stealth ship much faster." John knew he was being unnecessarily specific, but he couldn't help it. "Kelly, Fred, you're with me â€" we'll go down to the Didact."

"Aye, sir," Kelly and Fred answered immediately. N'hamee slung Linda â€" who had either fallen unconscious or been knocked out by the painkillers â€" over his shoulder, keeping her unprotected side to the back where, hopefully, it would not be a target. N'kane and Carter would cover that side, anyway.

"Good luck," N'hamee told John and Kelly over a private comm.

"Roger," John replied.

"May your sword burn brightly, Admiral," N'kane said. "If we do not meet again, I shall send a prayer to my ancestors that they watch you and your siblings in your next life." It was an offer a Sangheili warrior only made to those he considered closer than blood relatives; John knew the gesture was a profound one, though it only confused the other Spartans.

"Thank you," he told the Elite. "Fight with honor, my brother." He said it in Sangheili, forcing the awkward sounds out; Thel had taught him the phrase. The word for "brother" that he used was one of many such in the Sangheili language, and meant someone unrelated by blood but closer than family, to be trusted with more than life and called upon in times of crisis. It was a bond that few Sangheili shared, and no one had ever made one with any other race, even in the Covenant.

N'kane dipped his head in recognition of the honor John had done him and in farewell. He placed a fist over his primary heart.

The Promethean group at the end of the hallway sensed something was about to change; the volume of Crawler calls increased. Carter led the charge out into the hallway; N'hamee followed, keeping Linda protected in the middle, and N'kane brought up the rear.

John closed the door on his teammates and turned to Kelly and Fred,

who were calmly reloading their weapons. The Spartan activated the lift's doors as his sister ran a visual check over his armor, looking for weak spots " not that they could repair them, but it would help to be aware. She notified him of a few points where bolts of hard light had managed to do some damage when his shields were down, and he did the same for her. They both inspected Fred as the lift opened, and his armor was in the worst shape, though he was still upright and alert.

Cortana showed John how to activate the lift and it took them down into the planet. They traveled for nearly two minutes, going what Cortana said was several kilometers into the planet's organic surface and then penetrating the hollow inner sphere.

"This planet was manufactured," Cortana said, wonder in her voice. "It was \_built\_ to hold the Didact. Here we are. If you'll follow the map"

They stepped out of the lift and into what appeared to be a jungle, with a single dirt road running into it. John couldn't see around a bend fifty meters ahead, but his attention was caught anyway by what was standing on the road. "Well, this is a nice way to be greeted," Cortana quipped as a Promethean Knight immediately roared a challenge. Something popped out of its back suddenly; John targeted the floating Promethean and fired. It cast a shield " apparently a conscious effort " around itself and the Knight.

"Nade," Kelly grunted, tossing a Forerunner grenade at the air.

"No, wait!" Cortana gasped, but it was too late " the grenade sailed at the enemy and then suddenly floated around the hovering Promethean and came right back at them in a slingshot-orbit maneuver.

"Run," John ordered, already moving away. His team followed suit quickly, and the Forerunner grenade detonated, draining everyone's shields and spattering them all with dirt. Fred groaned involuntarily in pain; he had been just close enough to the blast for it to melt part of his armor, fusing it with his body suit " and likely some of the flesh beneath.

"No more grenades," Cortana scolded. "They throw them back."

"What are we up against here?" John asked, taking cover behind a low hill of dirt.

"Promethean Watchers. Those two circular plates on their sides generate shields that can cover Knights and Crawlers if they're close enough. They can also return grenades if they feel threatened. The Knights carry them around " I don't know why they weren't revealed on Earth, but the Glowsticks there didn't have them."

John shook his head slightly. It was a puzzle he didn't want to try solving at the moment. "Concentrate fire on the Watcher," he ordered. "Take it down first."

Kelly followed the order more quickly than everyone else, but soon the air between the two sides was filled with Forerunner hard light "bullets." No one had Covenant or human weaponry anymore, having used

it all on the Knights and Crawlers in the hallways.

Under their combined fire, the Watcher's extended shield quickly died, leaving the Knight more vulnerable. Kelly targeted the quick-moving Watcher while Fred and John aimed for the Knight. The pair dropped at the same time, both disintegrating.

"Target Watchers first," John ordered as they moved forward along the road. Cortana was already scanning their surroundings with John's armor, pushing his tracker to its maximum range. There were plenty of red dots on it, but she didn't find anything that could give them a direction in which to move other than the overgrown road.

Kelly melted into the brush on the left side of the road, while John stayed with Fred on the right side. They came across several single Knights, which launched Watchers from their backs, a handful of lone Watchers, and two packs of Crawlers that almost overwhelmed Kelly before the male Spartans made it to her side. They traveled together after that.

"Welcome to the Didact's prison, ladies and gentlemen," Cortana murmured into John's ear as the trio approached another large structure, this one dominated by Forerunner symbols scrawled in giant "letters" almost like graffiti across the building's face.

"What do the symbols say?" Kelly asked, slapping a new magazine into her boltshot.

"Basically," Cortana replied on the all-hands frequency, "we'd have something like 'Ye who enter here be warned' tacked up."

"No death threats?" John asked curiously.

Cortana's avatar, in the upper-right corner of John's HUD, shrugged. "Maybe on the back entrance, if there is one. I'm not seeing one here."

John led the group inside, Kelly just behind him and Fred guarding their six. "Stay here and keep the door open."

"Yes, sir," Fred replied, crouching next to the door just out of range of its proximity sensors. It slid shut and the walls glowed gently, casting everything in a disorienting, cold, directionless light. There was no alarm at their entrance, no shrieks of distant Crawler packs.

The two Spartans continued on and walked into what was obviously the building's main room, a large, circular area that John couldn't quite see the opposite end of.

"Ready?" John asked Kelly, motioning for her to come up level with him as they examined the large space. It seemed to fade into the distance. The door through which they had come hissed shut, the sound echoing slightly. There were four pillars spaced evenly around the centerpoint of the area, a large hemisphere, its sides glowing red-orange. Kelly and John stood on a fairly narrow walkway, just big enough for a Pelican to land, which was lit with blue lighting towards a pair of smaller pillars, as tall as John's waist, which stood at the end of the "dock." There were depressions to either side of the walkway, making natural defensive points.

"Not really," his sister replied neutrally. "Are we really going to release the Didact, after everything bad we heard about him?"

"We have to," John replied. "If we don't, the Forerunner ancillas will probably glass Earth."

Kelly was silent; John stepped forward into the room farther and positioned himself at the two waist-high interfaces.

As usual, though John couldn't read the symbols, they called to him. Before Cortana could suggest a course of action " or try to convince him to abandon their mission " he placed one hand on each pillar. The sphere glowed brighter, turning a more sinister red color.

"That's a warning if ever I saw one," Cortana murmured worriedly.

The Chief waited. He could hear Kelly shifting back and forth, wanting to move into action, but he concentrated on his task.

It took a total of thirteen seconds before something finally happened. John had the feeling he had entered some sort of code, but pushed the thought to the back of his mind as the large sphere rose from the depths of the room. The red-orange lines became more dense and hotter-looking near the bottom of the ball.

The sphere cracked along those lines as John leveled his rifle at the slowly-opening flower. He caught a glimpse of something inside, small and obviously mechanic, before the thing sent out a strong pulse of heat and light. Both Spartans were pushed back, Kelly flipped over and landed on one knee. John, perhaps because he had been closer, was thrown into the wall and rolled back to his feet as quickly as possible, bringing his rifle to bear on their new target. They dove behind one of the room's natural barriers.

The ball hissed openly and John spotted the humanoid kneeling on a platform that descended out of the sphere's fiery lava-like innards. He was dressed in red and silver, lines along his pectorals and face glowing a soft orange. The Didact flexed.

"So fades the great harvest of my betrayal." His voice was deep, almost mechanical. There were both over- and under-tones to it, as though more than one person spoke through the armor's faceplate.

Several Promethean watches suddenly appeared from another door, this one flush with the wall and almost undetectable before it had opened. They were glowing blue for a minute, but even as John watched, those glow-lines turned the same red-orange of the sphere and the Didact's armor.

"Even these beasts recognize what you are oblivious to, humans. Your nobility has blinded you, as ever." In a flash of humor, John recognized a monologue " and quickly refocused.

The barrier glowed red-hot, prompting John and Kelly to shift backwards automatically, and then disintegrated. John leapt into action, moving right " Kelly always preferred going left " and

bringing his rifle around. Before he could get off a shot, though, the Didact raised his arm, and the Chief felt his armor lock, an invisible force lifting him from the ground as though by a cable attached to his chest plate. His shields sparked and then failed.

Cortana was uncharacteristically silent and Kelly was forced to hold her fire as the Didact positioned John's armor between himself and the female Spartan.

"The Librarian left little to chance, didn't she?" the Didact asked rhetorically. "Turning my own guardians, my own world, against me." John grunted as his armor seemed suddenly two sizes too small. "But what hubris, to believe she could protect her pets from me forever. If you haven't mastered even these primitives," the Didact glared scornfully at the Prometheans, "then man has not attained the Mantle. Your ascendance may yet be prevented." The Didact curled his fist and John floated closer. "Time was your ally, human, but now it has abandoned you. The Forerunners have returned. This tomb is now yours."

The Forerunner snapped his hand out and John felt himself flung through the air. The armor took most of the impact with the wall, but it wasn't pleasant. John fell twenty feet and impacted solidly onto one of the barriers he'd noted before hitting the floor again, and his ringing ears could distantly make out the sound of Kelly's boltshot spitting fire at the Didact, now that his human shield was out of the way.

John levered himself to his feet, picking up his rifle and taking a step forward. His left leg was unstable — it had taken the brunt of the first impact. He favored it slightly even as he raised his rifle. The Didact's platform, however, was already lifting into the sphere's molten innards, Kelly's boltshot doing little to the shields surrounding the Forerunner.

The Sphere started closing and the air pressure increased dramatically. "Slipspace rupture," Cortana cried into John's helmet. "Chief, move!"

Kelly followed without being told as the pair sprinted towards the doors, but the heat wave hit them first, throwing Kelly into John's back and sliding them both into the sealed doorway. It opened and they stumbled through, half-blind.

"Where's he going?" John demanded of Cortana, straightening.

"Unknown Slipspace trajectory," Cortana replied immediately. "I don't know where we are, John, and your suit doesn't have the equipment to analyze Slipspace jump directions, especially when they're opened inside a room. You could have been killed." She sounded angry.

"Best bet is Earth." Kelly locked her boltshot onto her hip. "So we'd better beat him there."

"If they Forerunner AIs stick to their side of the bargain," Cortana reminded the pair, "they'll be waiting for survivors. We should backtrack to the surface and get back to Earth."

"That's a really big if," Kelly muttered, heading, nonetheless, back towards Fred.

John followed his sister, holding his rifle across his chest. As they walked back through the hallways, though, something tugged at the male Spartan, making his feet slow unconsciously until Kelly glanced back, curiosity in her posture.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," John replied, telling his feet to hurry up again â€" but even as he caught up to his sister, that same tugging made him turn half-way to the right.

"You're lying. You're a bad liar, John, always have been. What's up?"

"I don't knowâ€|" John frowned at the junction they were in, knowing they needed to take the left-hand branch to return to Fred, but somehow equally sure they needed to take the right. "I'm being pulled in that direction." He gestured. The lights in that particular hallway were dim and faded into darkness quickly.

Kelly grabbed his outstretched hand and pulled him towards the left hallway. "I'm not taking any chances," she told him. Despite his agreement with her, he felt himself resisting, almost against his will.

"John, knock it off, we've got to â€" Ugh!"

Unintentionally, the male Spartan set his feet and activated the magnetic soles. Or something did â€" John wasn't entirely sure who was controlling what. Kelly couldn't budge him just by tugging on his hand and she dropped it in disgust.

"I really think we should go that way," John said, unsure why the words were even leaving his mouth.

"John, you've obviously been compromised," Kelly replied reasonably. "And if I have to carry you out of here, I will." She reached around his head and slid Cortana's chip from his helmet interface, locking it into her own. "But for now, I'm taking Cortana until we figure out what â€" or who â€" is in your head."

John wasn't listening. Now that the AI was out of his head, that tugging was stronger. He released the magnetic soles and turned towards the dark hallway. Vaguely, he could hear Kelly yelling at him â€" but his armor was compensating as though for an explosion, buffering his ear drums.

He didn't notice Kelly slap his shoulder, or the tiny tracking device now lodged in his armor, as he hurried down the passageway. His sister, torn between two difficult decisions, sprinted down the left-hand passage. She needed to find Fred. Together, they could subdue John, even in his better armor, and get him on the surface.

~~Earth~~

Admiral Hood stepped into the cavern, listening to the former



captain, Septima, as she described what had happened. The briefings, debriefings, and meetings had consumed the entire Slipspace journey back towards Earth. All of the AIs onboard had been compromised, leading to mass-destruction of their memory cores. Lord Hood was just grateful to be alive; he and everyone else had been thoroughly shaken when the fleet had, as one, dropped out of Slipspace and then back in, directed back towards Earth by an unknown enemy.

"It's very secure," Septima said, pride evident in her voice. Hood looked around the cavern.

The tents dominated most of the space, though there were two cleared areas. One was clearly a play area for the dozen or so children: the other, a drill field for two dozen young men and woman.

"Would you like the tour, Lord Hood?" Septima asked, her voice slightly subdued. Admiral Hood realized he hadn't praised the woman for her ingenuity.

"You did well," he told her quietly. She smiled slightly and straightened, proud of the praise and accepting it. "I'd like to see Dr. Halsey â€" I can take the tour later. If there's time."

Septima nodded, heading down the rickety-looking staircase. Lord Hood and the six Marines with him followed her.

"Dr. Halsey?" Septima called into a tent at the far side of the city. Most of the tents were occupied, Lord Hood noted as they moved through, by hardy and ragged men and women. Living without electricity had been hard, but humans were a strong race â€" they'd proven that against the Flood and the Covenant.

"Yes?" The voice clearly belonged to an older woman. The tent â€" unremarkable from a hundred others like it â€" zipped open with a sharp hiss. "Captain Septima, I did askâ€"|" Dr. Halsey trailed off as she poked her head through the opening and caught sight of the admiral.

Lord Hood nodded politely. "Dr. Halsey," he greeted.

"Terrence Hood," Dr. Halsey replied coolly. "How are you, Admiral?"

"Well enough. I need you to come with me, Dr. Halsey. We need to know what happened here."

"You and everyone else," the doctor replied, reaching behind her. She stepped carefully through the tent's door and leaned slightly on a cane. "Where are the Spartans?"

Lord Hood shook his head. "We have not had contact with Sierra-117 or his team since they left Earth. I assume you have been studying the Glowsticks, as I heard they're being called?"

"I have been," Dr. Halsey agreed, pointing at her tent. "In fact, there's a suit in there which I have nearly finished preliminary eyes-only testing. If you bring it with us, I can use one of the ship-board laboratories to finish my examination."

"Dr. Halsey, you're not coming as a consultant," Lord Hood said

quietly. "You're coming as a prisoner."

There was stunned silence from the doctor and Septima both. Two of the Marines with the admiral, taking this for an order, stepped to either side of the civilian doctor.

"Terrence, what is going on here?" Dr. Halsey demanded angrily.

"I'm sorry, Catherine. My orders come from ONI directly. They want your hide for something."

Dr. Halsey scowled but nodded knowingly. "They always do," she said softly. "Let's go."

End  
file.